

Biggles

AND THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE



CAPTAIN
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BIGGLES AND THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE

On board the 500-ton super-luxury diesel-engined yacht Cordelia was thought to be Otto Brandt, international financier and one time multi-millionaire. Why did he pull out of England in such a strange and intriguing way? And why was his yacht loaded with ammunition? Biggles, Algy and Ginger fly across the world to discover his store depot on an island in the Bahamas and the reason for the disappearance of this Mystery Man of Europe.

FOREWORD

IN these days when all ships of any size carry radio it is seldom that one disappears without trace. Still less often does a millionaire vanish from his usual haunts without giving some indication of his intention. When these two things happened together, and the millionaire turned out to be the owner of the ship, it could hardly fail to arouse curiosity and cause anxiety in certain quarters.

Again, in these days of fast sea and air transport it may at first sight seem remarkable that an important yacht could sail out of a busy harbour to disappear as utterly as a puff of smoke on a windy day; but when we remember how much of the earth's surface is covered by the great oceans there is less reason to be astonished, particularly if it so happened that the master of the vessel did not want to be found. After all, it is not long since a big Portuguese liner, with hundreds of passengers on board, caused a sensation by departing from its course, with the result that although its position was roughly known it took a lot of ships and aircraft to locate her.

To demonstrate how difficult it is to find a 'lost' ship we need only quote the case of the 3,500 ton steamer *Dunmore*, which left Cardiff for America with a cargo of coal. Running into a gale she lost her propeller, and getting out of hand began to settle. The crew, expecting her to sink at any moment, took to the boats and in due course reached America, where they reported what had happened. The *Dunmore* was posted as lost.

Some months later a liner spotted a ship behaving as if she had lost her rudder. Her sides were red with rust, she had lost her funnel and her deck was swarming with rats. It was the *Dunmore*. For months she had been drifting about the Atlantic without anyone seeing her. As she was a menace to shipping a gunboat was sent out to sink her, but failed to find her. Apparently she had gone down at last.

A similar derelict was the *Alma Cummings*, which being abandoned in mid-Atlantic drifted nearly to the Bay of Biscay and then back to America before going aground and breaking up.

We can see, therefore, that if a ship deliberately tried to hide herself it would not be very difficult, as a glance at the atlas will reveal. Apart from thousands of miles of continental coast lines there are innumerable islands, archipelagos comprising hundreds of islands, many of them uninhabited. The Pacific is sprinkled with them. There are literally thousands in the Paumotus. (The name means Cloud of Islands.) There are 650 in the Caroline group, 225 in the Fiji Islands and 200 in the Falklands. It has been estimated that in the Indian Ocean alone there are 10,000 uninhabited islands.

Consider the vast archipelago that comes into the following pages, the great chain of islands known as the West Indies, which stretches in a curve from the United States to Venezuela in South America. So many islands are there, geographically, in the West Indies, they have been subdivided into

many separate groups. In one of these, the British Bahamas, there are estimated to be 3,000 islands, large and small, the majority of them uninhabited.

These brief facts should give the reader an idea of the enormity of the task confronting Biggles when he was ordered to find the luxury yacht *Cordelia*, somewhere on the high seas, but no one knew where.

W. E. J.

CHAPTER 1

A TALL ORDER

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND, of the Special Air Service at Scotland Yard, looked up from his desk as his senior operational pilot entered the room. 'With air and sea plus radio communications as they are, you wouldn't think it very difficult to locate a ship, would you?' he greeted him sadly.

That could depend on the size of the ship and whether she's on top of the water or under it,' returned Biggles. 'Why? Have you lost one?'

'It begins to look as if one's pulled off a smart disappearing trick.'

'Even today ships have been known to founder.'

'Rarely without sending out a distress signal, without leaving a trace of wreckage or a single survivor.'

'Did no one pick up an S.O.S. from this one?'

'Not a peep. It just sailed away, and may have gone into orbit round the moon for anything that has been seen of it since.'

'How long ago was this?'

'Nearly two months.'

'What sort of ship?'

'A five hundred ton super-luxury, twin diesel-engined private yacht, A.I at Lloyds and insured for a quarter of a million.'

Biggles pursed his lips. 'Who's claimed the insurance?'

'No one.'

'Who did it belong to?'

'Otto Brandt.'

'The international financier and oil millionaire?'

'That's the man.'

'I've seen a picture of that yacht. Named *Cordelia*, wasn't it?'

'Quite right.'

'What has Brandt to say about it?'

'He hasn't said anything. He was on it when it sailed.'

'Where for?'

'Nobody knows.'

'That was a bit peculiar, wasn't it?'

'Very.'

'Sounds like Brandt's bad luck.'

'Certain people are beginning to suspect that luck had nothing to do with it.'

'Why?'

'Sit down and I'll tell you about it.'

Biggles took the chair and lit a cigarette.

The Air Commodore resumed. 'You'd think a man like Brandt would be

above suspicion of anything crooked, wouldn't you?"

'It's hard to see why a man with all his millions should go anything but dead straight.'

'True, if the millions were real, and not just bits of paper.'

'Like that, eh?'

'It now turns out that Brandt hadn't as many millions as was generally supposed. He hadn't one million, or anything like it. He was certainly a multi-millionaire at one time, but even millionaires can make mistakes. New ventures and investments can go wrong. When such men gamble it's for high stakes, and when they lose they lose big money. Naturally, they're not interested in chicken feed.'

'Are you telling me that Brandt has lost his dough?'

'Most of it. Lost it or spent it. That wouldn't matter so much if it was all his own money. It now appears that a lot of money is missing that didn't belong to him. From information revealed by enquiries since the *Cordelia* disappeared, it now looks as if he may have saved his own skin regardless of the people who had put their savings into his many companies. Anyway, Lloyds and other people in the City are suspicious. They'd feel happier if the yacht could be located.'

'Don't say they've asked you to find it!'

'They've asked everybody, all over the world, who might help.'

'And nobody knows anything?'

'That's the position. Brandt bought the *Cordelia* when he had so much money he didn't know what to do with it. He kept her at moorings at Falmouth, going down for odd week-ends and occasionally taking a holiday on her. For six months prior to the yacht's disappearance these visits became more and more frequent. Curiously enough, or significantly as it now appears, over that same period he was buying objects of considerable value, gold, silver and jewels, in fact anything of a non-perishable nature.'

Biggles nodded. 'I get the drift. People are beginning to wonder if those things were being put aboard the yacht.'

'They're pretty sure of it. They can't be found. Where else could they have gone?'

'Was he known to be a collector of works of art?'

'No. Had he been interested in that sort of thing the Press would have got hold of it. Men like Brandt are always news for the newspapers.'

'Has it been suggested he bought this valuable stuff because it represented capital — something that could be sold where and when it suited him?'

'That's the view taken in certain quarters. The stuff could be sold for any currency he needed, probably United States dollars.'

'What about foul play?'

'That's been ruled out.'

'Hm. Queer business. How much is known about Brandt's background?'

'Very little. He avoided publicity.'

‘I remember seeing a picture of him in some newspaper. A man getting on a bit in years. Has a small beard and wears glasses.’

‘That’s right. Practically nothing is known for certain about his early life. He seems to have kept that covered up very well. In recent years the newspapers have taken to calling him the Mystery Man of Europe. It’s generally reckoned he was born in Central Europe; some say Germany, others Austria. While he was still a young man he went to South America, where he seems to have laid the foundations of his fortune. It’s said he put through a big coffee deal in Brazil. There’s also a whisper that he was mixed up in a revolution there. The fact is, we don’t know. All we know for certain is that he returned to Europe, bringing his money with him, and settled in Germany. When he saw the war coming he got out and came here. Later he applied for naturalization.’

‘As a British subject?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it granted?’

‘Eventually.’

‘Which means he has a British passport.’

‘Of course.’

‘Is there a warrant out for him?’

‘No. But there would be if it was learned he had absconded with other people’s money, which is what some finance houses in the City are beginning to suspect. So far it’s only suspicion. We’d like a word with him; but before we can do that it looks as if we shall have to find the *Cordelia*.’

‘Where is she registered?’

‘One of the so-called Free Ports. Panama.’

‘That doesn’t sound too good.’

‘To fly a Flag of Convenience, as it’s known, is perfectly legal.’

‘I know. But why does a man like Brandt have to do that? It seems he was glad enough to accept British nationality. Why not register his yacht in the United Kingdom?’

The Air Commodore shrugged.

‘Where did he make his home in England?’

‘In Hertfordshire. A country house called Warleigh Towers. The place doesn’t belong to him. He has it on lease. There’s nothing of value there. That was where the first investigations started. I should tell you that, over the same period that Brandt was buying valuables, he was also drawing large sums of money, in notes of small denominations, from his banks. His accounts are now practically empty.’

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. ‘It certainly looks as if he was feathering his nest with the sort of bits and pieces that might come in useful.’

‘I can tell you another interesting thing. Brandt, who was not married, by the way, had in his employ a private secretary, a man named David Vaucher, who was also reckoned to be something of a financial genius. Normally he

took charge while Brandt was away; but when the *Cordelia* pulled out Vaucher was on board, which was most unusual — I mean, the two of them being away from the office together. Why?’

‘If you’re asking me, I’d say Vaucher had to go because he knew Brandt’s financial position and knew he was making plans to skip. Anything else?’

‘Yes. There’s another curious angle, although with a man like Brandt it may not be as curious as it would be with you or me. The crew of the yacht, some of whom also worked at the house in Hertfordshire when the yacht was laid up, were all foreigners. There wasn’t a British subject among them. The cook was Chinese. The captain and chief engineer were Germans. The stewards were a mixed lot. The engine room and deck-hands were mostly Lascars. They all went with the yacht. The only people left at the house in Hertfordshire were a gardener with his wife, acting as caretaker. They’re both locals. They’re still there. They’ve only been in Brandt’s employ for a few months. They know nothing. Even now they don’t know what we suspect. All they know is their wages are long overdue.’

‘I see. Then to put the whole thing in a thimble the assumption is that Brandt, having got into difficulties, rather than face a financial crash, decided to pull out, taking with him anything left in the kitty.’

‘That’s about what it boils down to. Everything adds up to a carefully thought out plot. Or, if Vaucher is in it, a conspiracy.’

‘If that’s agreed, and if it can be proved, would Brandt be liable to prosecution?’

‘Certainly. He’s made off with other people’s money.’

‘Which means you’d like to get hold of him?’

‘Of course. It might be possible to recover some of the money and hand it back to the shareholders, who will otherwise be faced with a dead loss. If we could find the yacht, and seize it, apart from what might be in it, that alone would represent a lot of money.’

‘So if it’s the yacht you’re after, the first question that arises is, where would it be most likely to go?’

‘By this time it might be anywhere in the world.’

‘Even so, it couldn’t sail about the high seas indefinitely. Sooner or later it would have to call somewhere for stores and oil, in which case it would be spotted.’

‘As I’ve told you, it hasn’t been seen. Apparently Brandt has taken good care of that. He can’t have sold it. There can be only a few people in the world who could afford to pay anything like what the yacht is worth. That’s aside from the question of running it, which couldn’t be done under a hundred pounds a day. Even if a buyer did come along he’d want to see that the yacht’s papers were in order, and, if he had any sense, have her examined by a surveyor for dry rot, and so on.’

‘So you haven’t a clue as to where the *Cordelia* might have gone?’

‘Not a sausage. But there is one point to bear in mind. Brandt will expect

us to look for him. Therefore if he has gone ashore it will most likely be a country with whom we have no extradition agreement, and for that reason we'd be unable to touch him. No doubt he'd have all that worked out. He knew exactly what he was going to do. The way he set off is sufficient indication of that. The *Cordelia* slipped off her buoy some time during the night without paying her harbour dues, which is proof she had no intention of coming back. It looks as if she must have gone without showing any lights, too, or the coastguard station must have seen her go. In the morning she just wasn't in her usual place.'

'Who was the last person to see her?'

'The watch on a P. and O. boat homeward bound. She was then off Ushant, heading south-west, so she might have been making for South America.'

'She could have altered course in any direction after passing the P. and O. boat.'

'She certainly didn't stay long on any regular shipping lane, or someone would have seen her. She must have deliberately taken a course to avoid being seen.'

'If Brandt was running away one would expect that. How far could *Cordelia* travel without refuelling?'

'Over two thousand miles if she started with her tanks full, as we can imagine she did.'

'Then she could have crossed the Atlantic.'

'Oh yes.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I don't think we can count on her endurance range to tell us anything. Following the argument that Brandt had his scheme all cut and dried, he might easily have dumped a supply of oil somewhere to be picked up later. Then again, if he was prepared to go to all that trouble, he might just as easily have taken with him materials to alter the superficial appearance of the ship; in other words, disguise her. Paint her a different colour. Put up a dummy funnel. That sort of thing. That's been done before today. I'm assuming, of course, that the *Cordelia*'s crew knew what was going on.'

'That might be the answer as to why she hasn't been seen — or rather, recognized.'

'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

'It's hard to see how we can do anything,' admitted the Air Commodore. 'You might like to think it over. If you get one of your bright ideas as to where the *Cordelia* could have gone you might fly out and check up.'

'Where?'

'Anywhere.'

'Are you seriously suggesting that we might start a world-wide search for the *Cordelia*?'

'I'm willing for you to go anywhere within reason.'

'It's a tall order. I wouldn't hold out any hopes.'

‘There’s a lot of money involved. The law is said to have a long arm.’ ‘It’ll need to have a heck of a long one to reach as far as Brandt will have got by this time.’

‘Well, go and think about it. If the *Cordelia* hasn’t gone to the bottom with all hands she must be somewhere; and if she’s still afloat it must be possible to find her.’

‘You’re quite sure there isn’t a clue of any sort in this house in Hertfordshire?’

‘Nothing. Special investigators have been through it with a fine comb. Practically no papers were found. Brandt must have had a bonfire.’

‘What colour was the *Cordelia*?’

‘White.’

‘Could you get me copies of her blue-prints, and if possible a photograph of her, so that I shall know exactly what I’m looking for, and at the same time take into account any changes that might easily be made in her superstructure?’

‘I’ll try.’

‘One last question. Does the public know anything about this?’

‘Not yet. After all, we’re still working on suspicion. If the story leaked out it might have repercussions on the Stock Exchange. And if by some chance Brandt did come back after we’d accused him of fraud, we might find ourselves facing an action for libel.’

Biggles got up. ‘Okay, sir. I’ll turn the business over in my mind and let you know what I think about it.’

Biggles went back to his office where his police pilots, Lord ‘Bertie’ Lissie, Algy Lacey and ‘Ginger’ Hebblethwaite, were engaged in bringing the files up to date.

‘Well, what’s the drill?’ inquired Algy.

‘Nothing urgent.’

‘Nowhere to go? That’s unusual.’

‘I should have said, for the moment. We may find ourselves aviating round the world.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Looking for a yacht that sailed away and never came back.’

‘Is that all?’

‘It was no ordinary yacht. It happened to be a quarter of a million pounds job with everything laid on — including the owner.’

‘Who was he?’

‘Otto Brandt, the financial wizard and so-called multimillionaire.’ Biggles dropped into his chair and related the story as told to him by the Air Commodore.

‘We’re not seriously expected to find this ship?’ expostulated Ginger.

‘I don’t think so. The chief doesn’t expect us to burn a lot of petrol looking

for it. But I have a feeling he'd like us to make a pretence of looking, if only to prevent anyone from saying we didn't try.'

'Where would you start looking?' inquired Algy, closing a filing cabinet.

'That's what I'm hoping you'll tell me. I'm open to suggestions.'

'You've had longer to think about it than we have. Haven't you any ideas?'

'Not many. I'll tell you as far as I've got. Let's start by assuming that the *Cordelia* is still on top of the briny and not at the bottom. A well-found ship, which she is, should be.'

'She may have gone down.'

'Admittedly, but if we begin by taking that as a foregone conclusion we'd have no heart to look for her. So let's say she's afloat, sitting pretty at the objective Brandt had in mind when he pulled up his mudhook in Falmouth Harbour. We may also conclude that he knew exactly what he was going to do next. It's hardly likely that he'd be making for another anchorage near home. No. He intended going places, taking a course that would reduce to a minimum any chance of being seen on the way. Are you with me so far?'

'Absolutely, old boy,' agreed Bertie.

'Very well. Now let's set a limit to his possible track, as far as that's possible.'

'How can you do that?'

'If he didn't want to be seen he wouldn't go through the Suez or Panama canals, where he'd have to show the ship's papers.'

'I get it.'

'If he intended to make a long voyage there were two things he couldn't do without, oil being one and food the other. As he wouldn't want to stop near home to replenish these it's reasonable to suppose he'd start with a full load. It follows, then, that what he needed would be bought while he was at Falmouth. If we knew exactly what he'd taken aboard it might provide a clue as to where he was going. Give us an idea of the climate, for instance. He wouldn't buy tropical kit if he was going near either of the Poles. Conversely, if he was heading for a cold climate he'd need heavy clothes. This may all sound pretty vague but what else have we to work on?'

'And so?'

'If we're going to do anything about this business the first place to start asking questions is Falmouth, or some other port handy, Plymouth or Devonport, for instance. The best bet, of course, is Falmouth. An unusual quantity of stuff going aboard wouldn't pass unnoticed by the ancient mariners who hang about the sea-front at such places. Ships are to them what planes are to us, and having nothing to do they don't miss much.'

Algy spoke. 'I suppose it's occurred to you that if Brandt really intended to cover his tracks he might have burnt, sunk, or otherwise destroyed the *Cordelia*?'

'I can't see any man in his right mind wantonly throwing away a quarter of a million pounds. It's far more likely he'd try to keep the yacht even if that

meant spending money making her look like a different vessel. That would mean lying up for a time at some out-of-the-way place. He wouldn't want to spend too long doing that, either."

"You mean, with shipping agents all over the world looking for the *Cordelia*?"

"I was thinking more about the man himself. After the luxuries he's been used to he wouldn't bury himself on a desert island. To men like Brandt life means London, Paris, New York, Monte Carlo... somewhere where money would be of use to him. That goes for everyone else on board. Brandt may have dodged into some off-the-map creek for the time being, but he won't stay there.'

'All right. What does all this add up to?' asked Ginger. 'Are you thinking of going down to Falmouth?'

'Not me. I have to finish my annual report. But if you fancy a spot of clean sea air to blow the smog out of your lungs you can run down to see if you can make anything of it. Try the ships' chandlers, for instance, for anything they may have supplied to the *Cordelia*.'

'When shall I go?'

'As soon as you like. Follow up any likely trail, but don't be too long about it. You should have no difficulty in finding accommodation at this time of the year. You needn't go alone. Take Bertie with you for company if he feels like it.'

'That's me, old boy. I'm flat out for free holidays.'

'Okay. Then we might as well catch the night train down to Cornwall,' decided Ginger.

'See you in a day or two, then,' concluded Biggles, resuming his task at his desk.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST CLUES

THE next morning found Ginger looking out across Falmouth harbour from his room at The Greenbank Hotel where he and Bertie had found lodgings.

It was a fair, early spring day, gusty but dry, which was his chief concern in view of what they had to do. There was plenty of shipping on the water, most of it at moorings; a host of small private sailing yachts and dinghies, most of them still in their off-season covers, tugs with funnels smoking, showing they were ready should their services be required, deep sea tramps and an odd tanker. Cranes and derricks were already moving over the shipyards. The only craft really busy was a local ferry, gay in a new suit of turquoise paint, nosing its way to the pier from one of the several smaller ports along the coast. Gulls drifted about in their usual aimless fashion, squabbling over scraps, or finding perches on the laid-up yachts, buoys, railings or even roof tops.

Ginger and Bertie had breakfast together and forthwith set out to make inquiries, the form these were to take having been discussed at some length on the way down.

Any information they could find would be useful, so they had decided first to get into conversation with the local seamen whom they might expect to find along the frontage of the harbour.

They did not have far to go. On one of the seats on the short concrete pier, provided for passengers waiting for one or other of the ferries that plied between the coastal villages and their shopping centre of Falmouth, they came upon two old men, both bearded like Vikings, both smoking pipes, wearing the customary navy blue jerseys of those who follow the sea. One wore a salt-stained peaked cap, suggesting he had at some time been more than an ordinary seaman.

There was plenty of room on the seat, so Ginger and Bertie, after an exchange of civil ‘good mornings’, made themselves comfortable. After a few words about the weather had established contact, Ginger set about the real work, opening the way with: ‘What’s become of that fine yacht that was lying here in the summer? What was her name — oh yes, *Cordelia*.’

The old sailors were ready to chat, as such men usually are. The one wearing the peaked cap took his pipe out of his mouth and answered: ‘That was her name. She ain’t here now. Left us a couple o’ months ago. No one knows where she’s gone. If she ever intends coming back it’ll be some time before we see her.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘From the load o’ stuff she took aboard she might have been going to

Australia. I know. There were times when they had more stuff piled up than their own tender could handle, and I gave 'em a hand with my own little boat. Joe here'll tell you. Thought the stuff'd never stop coming.'

'What sort of stuff?'

'Gawd knows. There were scores of cases of liquor alone. There was boxes, crates, bags, and I dunno what else. Never saw so much cargo going on a yacht.'

'Who did it belong to?'

'Feller named Brandt. Millionaire, so they say. He must have been one, I reckon, the amount o' stuff he stowed aboard.'

'I gather he didn't buy his stores locally?'

'None of it. A feller who behaves like that ain't much use to the local tradesmen.'

'Where did he get all this stuff?'

'London, most of it.'

'How do you know that?'

'Some of the cases was marked Garrards, which I'm told is one o' those big stores in London.' The mariner turned a shrewd eye on Ginger. 'You got some interest in the *Cordelia*?'

'In what way?'

'Thought mebbe Brandt owed you some money.'

'Owe *me* money?'

'He owes money here. He slipped out without paying his dues, and without paying me for the work I did for him.'

'Aye. A lot of people would like to know where *Cordelia* went after she left here,' put in the second sailor.

'That was queer behaviour for a man as rich as Brandt,' went on Ginger.

'There was a lot o' queer things about that craft,' stated the first speaker, significantly.

'In what way?'

'Look at the crew, for a start. You never see such a lot. Never spoke to anyone. Couldn't get a word out of 'em. Never went into a pub. I reckon they must have had all they wanted aboard. One day when I was helping load I asked one of the Lascars what it was all about. Snapped me nose off. Told me to mind me own business.'

'He wasn't a proper Lascar,' put in the second sailor. 'He was a West Indian.'

'How do you know?'

'One day when I was in the post-office drawing my pension he came in with some letters to post. He put 'em on the counter while he took out the money to pay for the stamps. I was standing next to him and tried to get a squint at where the letters were going. He was too smart. He'd put 'em down with the addresses face downwards. I says to myself, I can be as smart as you, sailor, so I accidentally knocks 'em off the counter with me elbow. Sorry, I

says, and stoops to pick 'em up. But he was too quick for me. He was after 'em like a flash o' greased lightning. I managed to get one, though. Before he snatched it out of my hand I see in big letters at the bottom, British West Indies.'

'Jamaica?' guessed Ginger. 'There are a lot of islands in the West Indies.'

'No. It wasn't Jamaica. I only got a glimpse of the name of the particular island. Place I'd never heard of. It was short and began with a K. Karuli, or something like that.'

'I'll tell you one thing they took aboard which made me wonder what was going on,' resumed the man in the peaked cap. 'There was no mistaking it. Paint. Drums of it. Enough to paint a battleship. It had come off the train at Truro. I know that because it was one of the Truro railway lorries that brought it here. I thought that was a funny thing. They could have got here all the paint they wanted.'

'What colour was this paint?' asked Ginger, casually.

'Mostly black, but there was some red, too. Had it been white I wouldn't have given it another thought, *Cordelia* being a white ship.'

'Did all this stuff arrive together?'

'No. It was a'coming on and off for weeks. I couldn't help but notice it. Got a bit of a nuisance at times. That German skipper was always in such a darn hurry to get it under hatches, as if no one else had anything to do. We're busy here in the summer, you know, what with holiday people and the ferries at it all day with full loads. A lot of people weren't sorry to see the stem o' the *Cordelia*, I can tell you. She wasn't no use to the town. They didn't even buy their tobacco here.'

'Must have had plenty on board,' said Bertie.

'Aye. I reckon so.'

'Do you mean to say they bought nothing at all, no gear or anything, from the ships' outfitters and chandlers?'

'Never heard tell of it. Bit of a mystery, was *Cordelia*.'

Ginger agreed. He stayed a little longer chatting on general subjects, and then, with Bertie, strolled on.

'That wasn't a bad start,' he said. 'Biggles was right about the old salts being ready for a yarn. I bet they've done a fair bit of gossiping between themselves about the *Cordelia*. The only thing is, I'm afraid we've got in one go all the information we're likely to get in Falmouth. If none of the things put on board were bought here there isn't much point in asking questions at the outfitters. Had there been any other items of interest those two old boys would have known about 'em.'

'Obviously Brandt didn't want anyone here to know what he was doing. What about that paint? It was delivered in drums, so he couldn't very well prevent it from being seen.'

'It wouldn't be hard to guess what he wanted it for. When you're at sea in a ship there's only one thing you can paint, and that's the ship itself, or

something in it. I think we might as well go back to London. If those cases came from Garrard we should be able to find out what was in 'em.'

Bertie agreed there was no object in staying on at Falmouth, so they returned to the hotel, packed their kit, and took the next available train home. As they had a little while to wait, Ginger put a call through to Biggles and told him the position. Biggles agreed they might as well return to London, so on arrival they took a taxi to the office where they found Biggles waiting for them.

Between them Ginger and Bertie narrated all they had learned at the Cornish port, and not until they had finished did Biggles comment.

'It all goes to confirm what is suspected,' he said. 'Brandt must have known for some time what he intended to do and made his plans accordingly. I imagine the entire crew had a pretty good idea of what was going on, too, and had been told to keep their mouths shut. That's the only way we can account for their surly behaviour. Seamen don't normally behave like that. Apart from that you've made three points that give us something to think about. First, and the most important, is this business of paint in bulk going aboard. What else could it be used for other than paint the ship? Secondly, at least one of the coloured members of the crew came from the West Indies and wrote a letter home in which he may have said what his movements would be. Pity you couldn't get the name of the actual island. Large and small, there are a lot of islands in the West Indies, some of the smaller ones being privately owned or let on lease to people who can afford that sort of luxury. Thirdly, we have the name of the store in London that appears to have supplied the Cordelia with most, if not all, of the stuff required for the voyage.'

'What can we do about that?' asked Algy.

'I'll slip along tomorrow morning and have a word with them. They may jib at naming the articles bought by a customer, but I don't think they'll refuse to give me the information if I go in an official capacity. I may learn something or nothing. No doubt the main items were food, preserved in one form or another.'

'Will you do anything about the paint?'

'I don't think we need bother to try to find out who supplied it. It's unlikely the firm would know what it was for. Paint is paint, and I see no reason why Brandt should divulge what he wanted it for. The important thing is we know the colours, because if it's to be used to alter the appearance of the ship we can reckon the Cordelia will no longer be all white but have some black and red about her. Mind you, a ship like the Cordelia isn't an easy thing to disguise. It isn't enough to change the colour of the paint and alter her name. New papers must be faked. But Brandt would know all about that and do what was necessary with the same thoroughness as he appears to have done everything else.'

'And you'll go to Garrards in the morning?'

'Yes. I'll go alone. It should simplify matters.'

So the following morning, soon after opening time, found Biggles at the big London store where, at his request, he was shown into the general manager's office. Having shown his credentials he went straight to the point of his visit. 'I believe Mr Otto Brandt has an account with you?'

'That is correct. He is a very valued customer.'

'So I imagine,' returned Biggles, dryly. 'During the last few months he has placed a large number of orders, the goods to be consigned to his yacht lying at Falmouth.'

'That is so.'

'I would like to know what you sent to Falmouth.'

The manager frowned. 'Customers' accounts are treated —'

'In confidence. I know. But the circumstances are unusual. It may be to your own advantage to tell me what I want to know.'

'How?'

'Mr Brandt's bill must be a heavy one.'

'Of course.'

'Has it been paid?'

The manager smiled. 'We're not worried about that. Mr Brandt is a millionaire, and as such has unlimited credit.'

'You haven't answered my question. Has the account been settled?'

'Not yet.'

'Would you still be as confident that it will be paid if I told you, in confidence, that the yacht has disappeared, and the owner with it?'

The manager's expression changed. 'How long ago was this?'

'Two months. You're not the only people to whom he owes money. Now you will understand the purpose of these inquiries.'

The manager was now looking worried. 'You're not telling me he may not come back! He owes us a great deal of money.'

'I can only tell you that at the moment there are indications he has no intention of returning to this country.'

The manager looked aghast. 'If we sent the bill to the house in Hertfordshire surely it would be forwarded?'

'The only people at the house are a man and wife, gardener and housekeeper, and their wages are overdue. They have no idea where Brandt has gone, nor do they realize yet that he may not come back. It is in the hope of tracing him, through what he purchased here, that I have come to see you.'

The manager demurred no longer. He spoke on the house telephone, the ledger account was brought up and they went through the figures together. The result as far as Biggles was concerned was disappointing. The items were practically all canned food and wine. Two of these did interest him, however. They were a big order for the cheapest 'bully' beef in large size cans, and biscuits.

'I think that must have been intended for the crew,' surmised the manager.

'Could be,' said Biggles, dubiously. 'What's this item I see for maps?'

‘That order was put through our book department. If I remember rightly we hadn’t got them in stock and had to get them from the suppliers.’

‘Why hadn’t you got them in stock?’

‘I don’t know. We carry most countries. I can only think they must have been of some out-of-the-way place for which there is little demand.’

‘You don’t remember where?’

‘No. But no doubt I could find out from the department. They’ll have a record.’

‘I’d be obliged if you would.’

‘I seem to remember it was an unusually large order. I’ll get the details.’

The message was given over the house telephone and presently the list was brought in. Biggles pursed his lips as he looked down it. The areas covered were the West Indies as a whole, with separate maps of the Bahamas, Cuba, the republics of Haiti and Dominica, and Florida, in the United States. The order was for six of each.

‘Six of each,’ said Biggles, turning puzzled eyes to the manager’s face. ‘What on earth could he be going to do with six? A map lasts a long time.’

The manager shrugged. ‘We don’t ask our customers why they want the things they order.’

‘Of course not. Well, that seems to be all. I won’t take up any more of your time. I’m much obliged for your co-operation.’

‘But what shall I do about Mr Brandt’s account?’

Biggles smiled sadly. ‘For the moment I’m afraid there is nothing you can do. If he comes back no doubt it will be reported in the newspapers.’

With that Biggles took his leave and returned to the office.

‘Any luck?’ queried Ginger.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Biggles slowly. ‘At least I’ve now got something to think about.’ He explained the curious business of the maps.

‘That should give us a rough lead as to which part of the world Brandt headed for when he left Falmouth,’ said Algy.

‘Even so, it’s a pretty extensive area. It’s this six copies of each map that has got me guessing. Why six? You can only look at one map at a time.’

‘The extra copies were for other people,’ guessed Ginger.

‘That could be the answer. I wonder, were any of them left at this house in Hertfordshire, Warleigh Towers? A map that’s used a lot can tell a tale. Pencil marks. Pin holes made by dividers and compasses, and so on. I feel it might be a good thing to give Warleigh Towers the once-over. Couldn’t do any harm. In fact, if the Chief has no objection I’ll take the car and run over right away.’

‘Mind if I come with you?’ asked Ginger.

‘Come by all means. I’ll get the okay from the Air Commodore.’

Biggles went out, soon to return. ‘That’s all right,’ he confirmed. ‘Let’s press on. We’ll have lunch somewhere on the way.’

CHAPTER 3

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

“WE ask for Mrs Greene: that’s the name of the housekeeper,” said Biggles, as the car pulled up in front of a not very attractive red brick house in the Victorian style. Standing well back from the road, and reached by a drive bordered by evergreen shrubs, it was not such a large place as its name implied. Its only claim to ‘Towers’ was a pair of turrets, one on each side, introduced presumably by the architect to give the house an air of importance.

As they got out of the car Ginger distinctly saw a face peering at them from some nearby shrubs, these having been parted for the purpose. It had gone in a flash, as if the person realized he had been seen.

‘Somebody’s just taken a peep at us from the bushes,’ he told Biggles in a low voice.

‘The gardener, perhaps.’

‘No. He was too young. This was no married man.’

‘The gardener’s boy, then.’

‘Could be, but he wasn’t dressed for that sort of work.’

The subject was dropped when a man who may have heard the car come up the drive appeared round the end of the house. In his shirt sleeves and carrying a broom, he was obviously employed at the house.

‘Mr Greene?’ queried Biggles.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘We’re police officers making inquiries about Mr Brandt, of whom nothing has been heard for some time. By the way, have you got a son, or an assistant?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Then who was the person inspecting us from the bushes as we drove up?’

‘Young fellow, wearing a dark suit,’ added Ginger.

‘Oh, him. He’s been hanging about here for a month or more,’ said the gardener.

Biggles’s eyebrows went up. ‘Indeed? Who is he?’

‘I dunno sir. He ain’t a local boy. I’ve never been able to get near him. I thought of telling the police, but he hasn’t done no harm so far.’

‘But what’s his object? He must have one — unless he’s mad.’

‘I can’t imagine. He just creeps about the place keeping mostly near the drive.’

‘I see. Is Mrs Greene in?’

‘She’s round the back. I’ll tell her.’

The gardener retraced his steps. Presently the front door was unlocked and opened and a buxom woman of about fifty stood on the threshold. ‘My husband’s told me who you are. Do you want to look over the house?’

'Please.'

'Come in. We've had some gentlemen here before asking questions. We hope something will soon be settled because as things stand at present we don't know where we are.' The woman led the way into what, from its size, was the lounge, or sitting-room. 'Anything in particular you want to see?' she asked.

'I take it you do the general cleaning so you'll know where everything is kept?'

'That's right, sir.'

'Then tell me this. Have you noticed any maps about the house?'

'Maps, sir? No, I can't say as I've seen any.'

'What about books?'

'I never saw Mr. Brandt reading one. Only newspapers. But there are a few books in the room Mr Brandt used as an office. They were there when I came. In here, sir.' Mrs Greene opened a side door that gave access to a much smaller room. There was not much furniture. Standing against one wall was an old-fashioned glass-fronted bookcase. There was a massive writing desk with a leather chair, and against the opposite wall, some modern metal filing cabinets.

'It's no use looking in them, sir, they're all empty,' volunteered the woman, seeing Biggles's eyes rest on them.

'Quite empty?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you mean Mr Brandt took all the papers away with him?'

'He took some, I believe. What he didn't take he burnt.'

Biggles glanced at the grate. There were no ashes. 'Where did he burn them?'

'In the kitchen garden. My husband helped him. There were several loads.'

Biggles walked over to the bookcase and ran quickly through the titles. A minute sufficed to show they were early editions of Victorian authors, mostly fiction, and therefore of no interest to him. He had half turned away when he noticed a slim paper-covered booklet, so much larger than the rest that it would not stand upright, and it had been lain flat on top of the others. He took it out. It was an atlas, a cheap copy, costing perhaps a few pence, such as is used in schools. It had been well thumbed, and might have been in the house for years.

He took it to the window and went slowly through the pages. Stopping at one he held it up to the light, studied it for a moment, gave Ginger a peculiar look and handed the atlas to him. 'Take care of that,' he said quietly. Then, turning to the caretaker, he went on: 'I'd like to borrow this for a little while, if you don't mind.'

'Take what you like, sir. I don't see that it can matter much now.'

'Tell me this, Mrs Greene,' continued Biggles. 'When Mr Brandt went away did he take anything else from this room?'

‘I only noticed one thing had gone. It was his own property and had nothing to do with the house, so he had a right to it.’

‘What was it?’

‘An ornament. It always stood on the desk just in front of him.’

‘What sort of ornament?’

‘A statue. I suppose you’d call it a bust as it was only the head and shoulders.’

‘Who was it of?’

‘I did notice the name but I’ve forgot it. It was a soldier. He seemed to have his hat on sideways.’

‘Would the name by any chance be Napoleon?’

‘That’s right, sir. So it was. Fancy you guessing that.’

Biggles threw Ginger a knowing smile. ‘Thank you, Mrs Greene. If you say all the drawers and cabinets are empty we needn’t waste any more of your time. Now I’d like to have a word with your husband.’

‘I’ll call him.’

They followed the woman down a corridor to the back door and waited while she went on down a path calling her husband by name.

‘What are you going to do?’ Ginger asked Biggles, looking puzzled.

‘Have a look at the bonfire.’

‘What’s the use of that if the papers were all burnt?’

‘I shall be very surprised, and disappointed, if we find they were *all* burnt. Have you ever tried to burn a book, or a stack of papers — even newspapers?’

‘I can’t say that I have.’

‘Papers, in quantity, are one of the most difficult things to get rid of. Try it sometime and you’ll see what I mean. Unless you take each page separately, and crumple it up you’ll find only the outside edges get burnt. If the fire is a big one the inside pages of a book, or a thick wad of papers may be scorched, but some bits and pieces usually remain legible.’

The woman returned with her husband.

‘Oh, there you are, Mr Greene,’ said Biggles. ‘I understand from your wife that just before he went away Mr Brandt made a bonfire in the garden of certain papers.’

‘That’s right, sir.’

‘You helped him, I believe.’

‘I only helped him wheel the papers out in my barrow. He did the burning himself. Said he could manage that alone.’

‘Will you show me the place?’

‘Certainly, sir. This way.’

The gardener guided them to the vegetable garden and, on a patch of bare ground, pointed to a heap of ash, flattened by rain.

‘I shall be surprised if you get anything out of that,’ murmured Ginger.

‘You may learn something from this,’ replied Biggles. ‘Mr Greene, can you lend me a fork— just an ordinary garden fork?’

‘Certainly, sir. I have one right handy where I’ve been digging the potatoes.’ Greene fetched it.

‘Thank you, Mr Greene. I may be a minute or two so you needn’t wait. We’ll come back to the house when we’ve finished here.’

‘Very well, sir.’

‘Watch closely,’ Biggles told Ginger. ‘If I turn up a piece of white paper, grab it. You can collect any pieces that are brown from being scorched; handle them carefully or they’ll go to bits at a touch.’

So saying Biggles thrust in the fork some way below the top of the pile and lifting the mass turned it over on one side clear of the ashes.

Several pieces of white and brown paper came to light. They were small and discoloured, but they were sufficient to prove Biggles’s argument about the difficulty of burning paper in quantities. He waited while Ginger collected the pieces. ‘Put them between the pages of the atlas to keep them flat,’ he suggested.

The work continued, but, as Biggles admitted, without the result for which he hoped. Only small pieces had survived the flames; but they were better than nothing and carefully collected.

‘Brandt knew what he was doing when he made this fire,’ he said bitterly. ‘He wasn’t taking any chances of anything remaining unburnt. Not the first time he’s destroyed papers, I’d wager. Hello, what’s this?’ In a final effort he had driven the fork in deep. Some small pieces of cardboard had been exposed; one had been impaled on the fork.

‘Photos,’ said Ginger. ‘Not much use I’m afraid,’ he went on, stooping to pick up the pieces.

Biggles removed the piece from the fork. It was more or less round, the outside edges having been destroyed by fire. ‘This isn’t too bad. Looks like the middle part of a group.’ He wiped his find very carefully with his handkerchief.

They studied it together. It showed two men in white tropical duck suits standing with their backs to a mass of vegetation.

‘What’s that behind them?’ asked Ginger.

‘Sugar cane. It’s evidently a plantation. There’s nothing to show where the picture was taken. Must have been some time ago. We’ll take this home and put a magnifying glass on it. Anything else there?’

‘No. More photos, but there isn’t much left of ‘em. They’re all stuck up.’

‘Never mind. We haven’t done too badly.’

Ginger was putting the remnants in the atlas when a movement caught his eye. ‘We’re still being watched,’ he said softly. ‘Same chap. He’s standing behind a tree over there.’

‘What the deuce is he up to? I don’t like mysteries. We should be able to solve this one. ‘I’ll stay here. You walk away as if you’re going back to the house; then work your way round behind him. If we can get him between us we should be able to nab him.’

Ginger walked away until he had plenty of cover and then swung round on a course that would take him behind the intruder. Very soon he could see him, still standing behind the same tree watching Biggles. Moving with the caution of a stalking cat he closed on him. At the last moment the youth may have heard a sound, for he turned; but by then it was too late. Ginger leapt forward and brought him down with a rugby tackle. There was a scuffle, but it ended when Biggles joined issue. He twisted a nasty-looking knife out of the lad's hand and dragged him to his feet by the scruff of the neck.

Ginger looked at their captive. He was a slightly built young fellow of about twenty, black-haired, with the olive complexion of a Latin.

'What did you intend to do with this?' questioned Biggles in a hard voice, holding up the knife.

The youth drew himself up, eyes flashing, nostrils quivering, like a startled thoroughbred. 'I came to kill a man. I will kill him.'

'Oh. So that's it. Whom do you intend to kill?'

'The man who lives here.' The speaker's English was good, but with a marked accent.

'Do you mean Mr. Brandt?'

The lad's lips curled in a sneer. 'So he calls himself now.'

'Where have you come from?'

'I live in Havana.'

'You're a Cuban?'

'Yes.'

'Then I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing. Mr Brandt no longer lives here. He left England two months ago and is not expected to return.'

'So that is why I wait and never see him.'

'That is why.' Biggles went on sternly: 'You know, I ought to have you put in prison. I happen to be a police officer. What's your name?'

'Francisco Tristano.'

'And am I to understand that you came here with the deliberate intention of killing Mr Brandt?'

'When I find him I will kill him.'

'In this country we hang people for that.'

'I have sworn to kill him.'

'Why?'

'He killed my father.'

'How?'

'He shot him. It was a long time ago. My mother told me. Now I must for honour kill this crook, this swindler, this swine. Where has he gone?'

'That's what I'm trying to find out. He may have gone to the West Indies.'

The boy's eyes opened wide. 'So that's it,' he breathed. 'I should have guessed.'

'Guessed what?'

'That he would be up to his old tricks.'

Biggles looked at the lad curiously. 'What do you know about him?'

'Enough. His name is not Brandt.'

'What is it?'

'I don't know, but when he came to Cuba he called himself Valesid. There were two brothers. The one who now calls himself Brandt was Mattio. The other was Martino. They came from Brazil, where they had made much money in a revolution. My father, too, was rich, with big sugar plantations. These two robbed him of all his land.'

'How could they do that?'

The lad spoke passionately. 'They made friends with the Chief of Police by giving him money. They became so strong that they can rob everyone. But that is not enough. Martino must try to make himself President by a revolution. But it fails and they must run away. Their property on the island was confiscated. But their money could not be found because it was in the United States. The Chief of Police was shot, and many others. But just before this happens Mattio kills my father because he will not join the revolution. He said it was a duel, but my mother, who saw it all, says it was murder. So I must avenge my father. We have a thing, you know, called vendetta.'

'How did you know Brandt lived here?'

'I see his picture in an American magazine calling him a big financier. He has grown a beard but I recognize him.'

Biggles put out a hand to Ginger. 'Give me that photo we just dug up.'

Ginger passed it over and Biggles showed it to the Cuban. 'Do you know either of these men?'

Francisco did not hesitate. 'They are Mattio and Martino Valesid, before Mattio has a beard. That is sugar cane behind them so I think the picture was made in Cuba.'

'The man we know as Brandt?'

'Yes.'

'Where is the brother, Martino?'

'I don't know. He went to the United States.'

'Do you think Mattio may have gone back to Cuba?'

'No. If he is recognized he will be shot for what he did in the revolution that failed.'

'I see. What will you do now if I let you go?'

'I shall return home to my mother in Havana.'

'And then what?'

'I shall watch the newspapers until I find where the murderer of my father has gone. Then I shall kill him.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I'd think very carefully about that if I were you.'

The lad's eyes glinted. 'There is nothing to think about. Is that all, señor?'

'Yes, that's all.'

'I may go?'

'Yes. Go straight home.'

‘Thank you, *señor*.’ The boy strode off with his head held high.

‘Are you doing the right thing to let him go?’ questioned Ginger, dubiously.

‘What else could we do with him? To take him to court would stir up a pretty kettle of fish. The authorities want the soft pedal kept on this Brandt story for the time being. We might as well be getting along home. It has been an interesting afternoon.’

‘What do you make of it all?’ asked Ginger, as they walked to the car.

‘I don’t know, but a feeling is growing on me that there’s more to this business than an absconding financier. We’ve got one or two pieces of a jigsaw. When we get home we’ll see if we can make them fit.’

CHAPTER 4

BIGGLES MAKES PLANS

BACK at Headquarters, while Ginger laid out on the table the scraps of paper that had been recovered from the bonfire ash, the others were given a concise account of what had happened at Warleigh Towers.

‘By the way, you didn’t tell me what there was about the atlas that made you decide to keep it,’ said Ginger.

Biggles answered: ‘I didn’t want to talk in front of Mrs Greene. I brought it home to have a closer look at it. Brandt, or someone in the house, must have used it before buying those new maps from Garrards. Actually, I was hoping to find some of those new maps in the house, but as they aren’t there I can only suppose they went straight to the yacht. No matter. The atlas serves the same purpose for which I wanted to see them. In view of the locality covered by the maps, I wasn’t surprised to find in the atlas a slip of paper marking the page showing the same area—the West Indies. The page has been well used and there are some faint pencil lines on it.’

‘Why did you hold the page up to the light?’

‘I was looking for pin holes.’

‘Did you see any?’

‘One. At the point where two lines intersected. That should be of importance because it suggests someone, using a compass or dividers, measured the distance from the intersection to the extremity of the lines. One ended on the coast of Cuba and the other at the southern tip of Florida, the nearest point of the United States.’

‘What was at the point of intersection?’ asked Algy.

‘Strange to say, nothing. Anyhow, there was nothing shown on the map. But then, we must remember there are thousands of small islands in the West Indies which wouldn’t be marked in an atlas: they’d only appear on a large scale map. Try the admiralty chart of the Bahamas to see if that shows anything. The point is a little south of Andros Island. That’s a large one so it will certainly be shown.’

Algy pulled out a drawer of the big chest that held the charts flat and withdrew the one required. Using the atlas as a guide he was able to announce: ‘There is an island. Just a dot in the ocean. The name is Isla Santana.’

‘Good. We may as well finish this while we’re at it. Bertie, look up Santana in Admiralty Sailing Directions.’

Bertie did so. ‘Isla Santana,’ he read. ‘A small rocky island on the Great Bahama Bank midway between Andros and Cuba. No more than the crater of an extinct volcano. Diameter of central lagoon nowhere greater than one mile. One narrow passage north side. No anchorage. Depth between two and three

hundred fathoms. No fresh water, wherefore no regular inhabitants. That's all.'

'It's enough,' said Biggles. 'That's all we need to know for the moment. Brandt, or someone employed by him, has an interest in Santina Island.'

'That may be where the *Cordelia* has hidden herself,' suggested Ginger.

'Could be, although I can't see a man like Brandt spending any length of time on a waterless rock in the middle of nowhere. Now let's have a look at the bits of paper we collected. Have you been able to make anything of 'em, Ginger?'

'Not a lot,' answered Ginger, who had been arranging the fragments. 'Most of the writing is in Spanish. There are one or two addresses that may tell us something.'

Everyone walked over to the table on which the scraps lay. All were charred round the edges and discoloured by scorching. The more fragile pieces had already broken. At the best, the pieces were only small portions of the original letters; one of the four corners, or a strip from one side so that there only remained two or three words of successive sentences.

Starting with the top one, Biggles began to read, first in the original Spanish and translating as he went along. The first was a corner piece and showed only an address. *Palacio de los Rosa, Havana*. The next was a side piece, and appeared like this:

...de los articulos que fabrica

... el condenido

Ptas 1000.

Biggles translated... "Articles of manufacture... the contents... a thousand pesetas." At the present rate of exchange that's about six pounds somebody is paying for something.' He went on to the next piece:

'... tiene dos millas de largo

... hay en el frondosos arboles

So something is two miles long and lined with trees,' he translated.

The next piece was another address. Hotel Castello, Tangier. Of the actual letter the only words legible were the last of each line. They were typewritten and in English: '... you wish ... can meet... ask for... MacIrish.' The other scraps showed a few words but they were useless for all practical purposes.

Biggles admitted disappointment, but said this was better than nothing. The most significant item was the address in Tangier, and the name, or nickname, MacIrish.

'The clue to the whole affair could be in Tangier,' he conjectured. 'Brandt must have had some business there. What was it? That he was able to conduct it by correspondence suggests he was in touch with someone with whom he had already had dealings. As an international port with unusual police arrangements, the place has a shady reputation. It's the headquarters of the hottest racketeers in Europe. Currency smugglers, dope runners, illicit diamond buyers, spies and what-have-you. Not long ago things were tightened

up so they're not as bad as they were. Too many adventurers with small fast craft were making fortunes running forbidden merchandise, guns, drugs and so on. It might be a good thing for someone to run down and get a line on the traffic handled by this fellow who calls himself MacIrish. That he finds it necessary to use what is obviously a nickname suggests he's a crook. I wonder, does Paris know anything about him? France has a big stake in Tangier, which is close to their trouble spot, Algeria. Marcel Brissac may know what it is that can be bought for a thousand pesetas. Algy, get him on the phone. He once told me they suspected half their troubles in Algiers stemmed from Tangier.'

Algy soon had Marcel Brissac, Interpol agent of the French police headquarters in Paris, on the private line. Biggles took the receiver. 'Biggles here, Marcel. *Bonjour. Je vais bien, merci. Ecoutez.* I have a sudden interest in Tangier. Have you ever heard of a man who calls himself MacIrish? You have! Go ahead, I'm listening... Yes... ah ha... like that, eh? Just what I wanted to know. Yes, I'll call you again if necessary. *Au revoir.*' Biggles hung up, and the face he turned to the others now wore a different expression.

'So now we know,' he said grimly. 'MacIrish is the cover name of one of the slickest smugglers in the Mediterranean. His big line is gun running. It's through him that cheap firearms, obsolete in European armies, are reaching recalcitrant coloured tribes in Africa. He runs his own boat and will supply anyone with anything for cash. The police have been after him for years but they've never been able to pin anything on him. When things get hot he disappears into the International Zone, in Tangier, where the fantastic police arrangements make it difficult to get near him. Incidentally, Marcel tells me that during the troubles in Cyprus he was supplying both the Greeks and Turks with small arms and grenades.'

'A nice feller to put out of the way,' growled Bertie. 'What's his nationality? Did Marcel know?'

'No. He thinks part Spanish and part Arab, but he boasts of Irish blood. Hence the fancy name. I can't say that what Marcel has just told me caused me any great surprise. I half suspected it.'

'But how could this hook up with Brandt?' asked Ginger. 'What could he want with weapons?'

'You haven't forgotten he's had one go at starting a revolution — assuming what that lad Francisco Tristano told us is true; and I see no reason to doubt it. Would it be surprising if he tried again?'

'But why should he? Already he has enough money—'

'That may be, but to some people money is not enough. Something I saw — or rather, didn't see — at Warleigh Towers, made me think he might be one of those.'

'What was that?'

'Do you remember Mrs Greene telling us that a bust of Napoleon used to stand on Brandt's desk? He took it with him when he left.'

‘What about it?’

‘I’ll tell you something worth knowing. It was told to me years ago by a top line psychologist who really knew his stuff. Napoleon is the unmistakable hall mark of ambition, when ambition becomes a disease. Don’t ask me why Napoleon in particular, but it’s a fact. I’ve been watching it for years. The next time you see a photo of a big industrial tycoon, a newspaper magnate or a professional politician, never mind his face. Let your eyes wander round the room and more often than not you’ll see a bust or a picture of Napoleon. It’s become quite a habit with me to watch for it. To such people Napoleon is a sort of god. I could tell you of one man who went as far as changing his name so that he could sign his letters with the initial N, just as Napoleon did. Be careful of such men because with them ambition has become an obsession and they let nothing stand in their way. It dominates their lives. You see what I’m driving at. If Brandt kept a bust of Napoleon on his desk it means he was bitten by this same bug. To be a millionaire was not enough. He wanted *Power*; and that, I’d say, is what he’s after now. He has an added incentive. He’s made one grab at it and failed.’

‘In the West Indies.’

‘Or Central America. This puts the whole business in a different light. It adds up with what we already knew. The charts that Brandt bought, for instance, with enough food to feed a small army. If he’s been in touch with a gun runner — need I say any more? Unless something is done about it a lot of silly fools are going to die in order that Brandt may become a conquering hero. Heaven only knows what mischief he may spark off.’

‘What are you going to do about it, old boy?’ asked Bertie.

‘I’m going to speak to the Air Commodore — right away. Already we may be too late to scotch the plot.’ Biggles reached for the inter-office phone. Having ascertained that the Air Commodore was free, he went down.

‘What’s on your mind?’ was the greeting he received.

‘This Brandt case.’

‘Have you been able to make anything of it?’

‘More than I expected. I don’t like the way it’s shaping so I thought you’d better know about it before we stick our necks out.’

‘Does that mean you know where Brandt has gone?’

‘I wouldn’t go as far as that, although I’m pretty sure of the general direction. But there’s more to it than that. It’s what Brandt may be doing that has brought me here.’

‘And what do you think he may be doing?’

‘Starting a revolution in the West Indies, or one of the Central American republics, using a British island as a base.’

The Air Commodore stared. ‘Great Heavens, man! You can’t mean that!’

‘I do mean it.’

‘If you’re right this could lead to a difficult situation with the United States. You know with what importance they regard the approaches to the Panama

Canal Zone.'

'I was thinking about that. If it was learned that a British possession was being used as a base for operations they'd take a very dim view of it.'

'It never occurred to me for a moment that Brandt was doing anything other than running away from his financial responsibilities. Have you told anyone else about this?'

'Not outside the office.'

'Then keep quiet about it until we're sure of our ground. Now you'd better tell me what you know.'

Biggles related the facts in the order in which he had uncovered them. 'So there you have it, sir,' he concluded. 'Brandt is an adventurer who, if my information is correct, is prepared to stoop to murder to get what he wants. He once made a grab at the presidency of Cuba, but the attempt failed and he lost his estates there. It may be he's hoping to get them back. When the *Cordelia* sailed she had on board paint to change her appearance and rations to feed a private army. She had several sets of large scale maps of the Caribbean area. Brandt has been in touch with a man in Tangier who I'm told is a gun runner. It wouldn't strain the imagination to guess what the business was with him. With a yacht for transport, food, maps and small arms, Brandt seems all set to start trouble somewhere in a big way.'

'He'd need men for a revolution.'

'We can assume provision has been made for that by someone on the spot, possibly Brandt's brother — someone already in Havana — at the *Palacio de los Rosa*, for instance, whatever that may be. It could be a hotel or a private house.'

The Air Commodore got up and paced the room. 'I don't like the sound of this. The disturbing thought is that a British island may be used as a springboard for an attack on a friendly country. That would lay us open to criticism.' The Air Commodore stopped and faced Biggles squarely. 'What did you intend to do next?'

'I thought of making a trip to Tangier to check up on this fellow who calls himself MacIrish. Alternatively I could fly out to Isla Santina. But it might be better to try Tangier first.'

'Why?'

'To make sure we're not barking up the wrong tree about why Brandt has been in touch with MacIrish. The answer could be guns, but that's only conjecture. It would strengthen my hand if I knew for certain. Otherwise, suppose I went to Santina Island and found the *Cordelia* there, either as herself or having been disguised? What could I do? If I knew she had rifles on board I could take measures I wouldn't dare to risk if I was working merely on suspicion. I might find myself facing a charge of piracy.'

'Do you think an aircraft is the right way to tackle Santina?'

'In the first instance, yes. Brandt wouldn't pay much attention to a passing aircraft, whereas the arrival on the scene of a naval frigate would send him

scuttling to somewhere outside our jurisdiction. After all, we've no proof yet that the *Cordelia* is at Santina Island. Everything points to her being somewhere in the West Indies, and if we failed to find her at Santina it shouldn't take me long, in an aircraft, to nip around and locate her.'

'Yes. I see that. All right. I'll leave it to you. Do what you think best, but work fast. Brandt has had two months' start so time may now be the vital factor. I take it you'll go first to Tangier.'

'Yes. I'll fly out on the regular service. In that way I'd be less conspicuous than if I arrived in a private machine. There are a lot of inquisitive people in Tangier.'

'Some have reason to be. Remember it and be careful. The International Zone in particular has a reputation for unexplained disappearances.'

Biggles smiled whimsically. 'I've been close to disappearing a good many times and one of these days I suppose it will happen. There's a lot of truth in the old adage about the pot that goes too often to the well getting broken. However, I'll do my best to remain in circulation until we've put a spoke in the wheel of the ambitious Mr Brandt. I agree with you about the time factor. This is one of the occasions when I want to be in two places at once. Wait a minute though. Why not?'

'Be in two places at once — Tangier and the West Indies?'

'How?'

'If you don't mind all of us being away together, we could take the *Gadfly* and fly to Gibraltar. Leaving the machine there I could take the public service across the Strait to Tangier. It's only a mile or two. The point of that is, it wouldn't be necessary for me to return home when I'd finished in Tangier. The machine would be practically on the spot. I could fly straight on to Dakar and take the short Atlantic crossing to Natal. From there I could follow the main trunk route north to Nassau in the Bahamas. As a base on British territory that's about as near to Santina as we can get.'

The Air Commodore was looking at the big wall map of the world. 'That looks a sound proposition to me. It would certainly save a lot of time.'

Biggles smiled again. 'If I disappeared in Tangier the others could carry straight on to Santina and finish the job.'

'I can't see them going without you. However, you know what you're doing.'

'Then let's leave it at that, sir. If I don't contact you direct the others will keep you up to date with events.'

'I leave it to you.'

Biggles stubbed his cigarette and departed.

CHAPTER 5

ON THIN ICE

TWENTY-FOUR hours later Biggles and Bertie were resting over a cup of coffee on the terrace of the Hotel Alcazar in Tangier, a lodging that had been recommended by Marcel Brissac whose duties frequently took him to Morocco. Algy and Ginger had remained with the air police *Gadfly* on the airfield at Gibraltar, the towering rock of which could be seen across the sparkling blue water of the narrow Strait.

Biggles's first intention had been to tackle alone what he knew would be a job calling for delicate handling, and it was only on persuasion that he took a companion to lend a hand should he find himself in difficulties. For in the once redoubtable Moorish stronghold, with its mixture of races of all colours and creeds, people who ask questions are regarded askance by that section of the population which has reasons for keeping in the shadows. And, of course, the only way Biggles could get the information he needed was by asking questions. Few places in Europe or Africa can claim such a mixed collection of inhabitants. Arabs, negroes and orientals rub shoulders with nationals of every country in Europe, brought together by the peculiar conditions that prevail. What some of these people do for a living is their own affair, and the tourist, if he is wise, respects that.

Actually, Tangier is the chief commercial city of Morocco. In theory the country is ruled by a Sultan, and it is in fact he who deals with native affairs. What is unique is the International Zone, controlled by police of several nationalities. Most of the streets are too narrow for vehicles, goods being carried by donkeys. The Great Sak, or market place, is the terminus of the Saharan caravan routes. Muslims and Christians have their own schools. To be fair, the city is what the visitor makes of it. If he is content to see the sights and mind his own business, he has nothing worse to fear than the attentions of beggars, would-be guides, and the vendors of merchandise of every description. But this goes on at most Mediterranean ports where there is a native population.

Biggles knew all this, of course: knew that no one would be likely to bother him while he and Bertie remained what they appeared to be — casual tourists. But once he started asking questions that touched upon the activities of the underworld, the crooks, spivs, and smugglers who have made their headquarters in the International Zone, he would soon become an object of suspicion. The difficulty was to know how to begin. He knew *where* to begin. The hotel named on the scrap of paper found in Brandt's bonfire. He had no idea where the establishment was but it was there that they would have to start.

'Well, let's get on with it,' he told Bertie, finishing his coffee. 'It's no use

fiddling about. The only thing to do in a case like this is take the bull by the horns and trust to bluff.'

'Where do we find the bull, old boy?'

'At the Hotel Castello. Where else?'

'Fair enough. Let's toddle along and give it the once over. Have you any idea what sort of place it is?'

'Not the remotest. All I know is, it's not on the list of hotels given in the guide book.' Biggles beckoned the fez-hatted Turkish waiter who had served them. 'Where can I find the Hotel Castello?' he asked, speaking in French.

The man's dark eyes explored his face for some seconds before he answered. 'It is near the *Kasbah*.'

'The native quarter.'

'By the old fortress.'

'Could you, to save us time, find a reliable guide to take us there?'

'If that is what you wish.' The man walked away and could presently be seen talking to the clerk in charge of the reception desk, a sleek, olive-skinned individual whose parentage would have been hard to guess. He strolled over to them, his face expressionless. 'You want to go to Hotel Castello?'

'That is correct.'

The man spoke slowly. 'Are you sure that is the name?'

'Of course I'm sure. Why?'

'It is not a good place for foreigners.'

'Don't worry about that. We have some business there.'

'Ah! I understand. I find you a guide. You pay your bill before you go, please.'

Biggles raised his eyebrows. 'Why? What's the hurry?'

'Perhaps you do not come back.'

Biggles took out his wallet and selected a note. 'Here's a deposit.'

The man took it and departed.

'He's got a cheek,' complained Bertie.

'He probably knows his business. Anyway, he leaves us in no doubt as to what he thinks of the Hotel Castello.'

It was some time before the clerk returned. With him came an Arab with a pockmarked face, hands like claws and an expression which, perhaps intended to be friendly, would have frightened anyone of a nervous disposition.

The Arab salaamed. 'Me good man,' he boasted. 'I show way very quick.'

'Lead on,' requested Biggles.

They set off, the guide in front steering a course through a sea of humanity with a fine disregard for anyone who got in his way. This became really necessary when, after a short walk, they entered a typical bazaar, a narrow, noisy street, choked with stalls and overloaded donkeys, where everything imaginable was being offered for sale. A great babble arose from the vendors and those who argued with them over price.

About half-way down this insalubrious thoroughfare the guide stopped at a

shop in the doorway of which, beaming a smile, stood a portly figure in garments so spectacular that he might have stepped from an oriental play. Over a yellow shirt he wore a red, gold-braided bolero. Voluminous blue trousers were caught in at the ankles over scarlet Moroccan slippers. On his head he sported a fez set at a jaunty angle. Gold rings swung from his ears. A wisp of fine black hair drooped from his top lip below the ends of his mouth. When he spoke it was in the thin, airy, high-pitched voice commonly heard when English is spoken in the Middle East. A rug hung over one arm.

Biggles looked at the guide. 'Why have you brought us here?' he demanded curtly.

The man raised his hands, palms upward. 'My friend sell very fine carpet.'

'I don't want a carpet. You know where we want to go. Lead on.'

The man in the doorway gave Biggles a curious smile. 'Come inside, sir, for a moment,' he purred, in an ingratiating voice. 'It is better we should not talk in the street.'

Biggles looked at him. He looked at Bertie. 'I don't know what his game is, but I fancy there's more to it than carpets. Let's see.' They followed the man into his shop, a small place draped with carpets. There were carpets everywhere.

'Now, what's all this about?' asked Biggles. 'You heard me say I don't want a carpet.'

'Yes, I heard that. You are on your way to the Hotel Castello.'

Biggles frowned. 'Who told you?'

'My friend who brought you here.'

'Why did he tell you that? Of what interest is it to you where we're going?'

'In bringing you here my friend was obeying the order of the manager of your hotel.'

Biggles stared. 'I like his impudence. What the devil has it got to do with him where I go?'

'He may be concerned with your safety.'

'And where do you come in, anyway?' inquired Biggles coldly.

'Let us say I'm concerned with the same thing.'

'You expect me to believe that! Why, you know nothing about me.'

'I know enough.'

'What do you mean by enough?'

'You have friends in Paris who request the manager of the Hotel Alcazar to keep an eye on you. Here it is very easy to get into trouble.'

'I see,' said Biggles, still looking suspicious. 'And allowing that to be the truth, why should the manager send us to you?'

'Perhaps because it might save complications. I may even be able to tell you the answer to the question that brought you to Tangier.'

'Do you know what that question is?'

'No. But I know many things. It is my business to know. I can tell you, for instance, that it is easier to get into the Hotel Castello than to get out.'

Biggles hesitated. He had come to Tangier determined to trust no one. How far could he trust this man, who was certainly not what he appeared to be? He was, quite obviously, an agent of some sort; a spy; but whose side was he on? The law? Or the other side? Either way one thing was clear. Although he and Bertie had only been in Tangier for a few hours their arrival had not passed unnoticed. Who were the friends in Paris who had requested the manager of the Hotel Alcazar to keep an eye on them? Marcel Brissac, his opposite number at French police head-quarters? That might well be the answer, for it had been Marcel who had recommended the Alcazar. Was that because he had a contact there?

Biggles resolved to take a chance. He would have to take a chance somewhere, sometime, anyway, and the carpet shop might be less dangerous than other places he could think of. Speaking distinctly he said: 'I came to Tangier hoping to make contact with a man who calls himself MacIrish. Do you know of him?'

'Most people who live here know of Captain MacIrish, although I doubt if they would know him by sight. Many stories are told of him but he rarely appears in public. Was it in the hope of seeing him that you were going to the Hotel Castello?'

'Yes.'

'You will not find him there.'

'Why not?'

'His schooner, the *Queen Pat*, left here more than a month ago, and it never sails without him. He uses the Hotel Castello as a convenience address for letters.'

'What else do you know about him?'

'He is one of those men who make a living by sailing near to the wind. The *Queen Pat* is known in every port between the Bosphorus and the Azores. Her owner is wanted by the police of every country touching the Mediterranean. They catch him often enough, but when it comes to a showdown they have to let him go because they can prove nothing against him. He is known to be one of the most successful smugglers who ever defied the law. Whenever his schooner has been arrested, and that has sometimes happened on the high seas, there is never any cargo on board.'

'Captain MacIrish is always too smart for them.'

'So far.'

'Does he specialize in any particular commodity?'

'No. Many things, all dutiable, have been mentioned.'

'Guns?'

'According to rumour, yes, but there has never been proof.'

'You don't know where he's gone now?'

'No one ever knows where he has gone.'

'They might know at the Hotel Castello.'

'That is unlikely. But if they knew they wouldn't tell you. It would be

dangerous to ask such a question.'

'What sort of place is the Castello?'

'It is a nest of foxholes run by an Arab for Arabs.'

'No Europeans stay there?'

'I have never heard of it.'

'I see. Well, as I am so near I might as well go on to the Hotel Castello and leave a message for Captain MacIrish.'

'It is for you to decide, sir. I have told you what I know.'

'Thank you.' Biggles turned to the guide. 'We go on to the Hotel Castello.'

Resuming their walk, Bertie said softly to Biggles: 'This is a funny do, old boy. What do you make of it?'

'I don't know. That carpet-wallah might be genuine or he could be a spy working for MacIrish or someone else at the Hotel Castello. One thing sticks out a mile. People began to take an interest in us from the moment we mentioned to that coffee-waiter at our hotel that we were interested in the Castello. We're obviously taking a risk, but having started we might as well go through with it.'

The guide had stopped at a curtain, flush with the narrow road, composed of long strings of beads. From the signs and names everywhere in Arabic it was clear they were deep in the native quarter. The type of people moving about was sufficient indication of that, anyway. The men were shrouded like ghosts. The women were veiled.

Biggles paid the guide, telling him he needn't wait.

Bertie looked at Biggles. 'You're going in?'

'Of course. We have a good reason. We want to buy guns. What I actually want to find out is if Brandt bought guns from MacIrish and if so how many. Better let me do the talking.'

The beaded entrance rattled as Biggles parted the strings and walked into a room which, after the sunlight outside, was in comparative darkness. It had the usual queer native smell. Presently, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he could make out a man, sitting on a divan, looking at them over a newspaper. In the dim light it was impossible to see him clearly. Seeing that he was observed the man rose and came towards them.

'You speak English?' queried Biggles.

'Some. Not good. French better. You want something?'

Biggles did not dissemble. 'Yes. I came hoping to see Captain MacIrish.'

'MacIrish? Who is this?'

'You know and I know. Is he here? I want to talk business with him.'

'Not here.'

Out of the corners of his eyes Biggles saw two Arabs glide into the room and take up positions between them and the door. 'Do you know when the captain will be back?'

'No.'

'In that case I must try somewhere else for what I want.'

‘What you want?’

‘Guns. Rifles and cartridges.’

‘Why you think we have guns here?’

‘A friend of mine in England advised me to see Captain MacIrish.’

‘What name this man?’

Biggles hesitated. He would have preferred not to mention names but it was now clear that he would have to furnish proof of his assertion. His unsubstantiated word would not be enough. ‘Mr Brandt,’ he said.

‘Not know any man name Brandt.’

Biggles was taken aback. Had Brandt used a false name, or could he have worked through a nominee? Vaucher, his confidential assistant, for instance. ‘The business might have been done through Mr Brandt’s secretary, Mr Vaucher.’

Apparently this hit the mark, for the man went on: ‘How many guns you want?’

‘About a hundred. The price, I believe, is one thousand pesetas a piece.’

‘Not for one hundred. For two hundred. For one hundred, more.’

‘I should want to see a sample before settling a price. But we can talk of that when I see Captain MacIrish.’ Biggles turned to go.

‘I can show you gun we sell.’

‘When?’

‘Now.’ The man spoke in Arabic. One of the Arabs departed, presently to return with a cavalry carbine of Belgian make and obsolete pattern. Biggles examined it with professional ability. ‘Plenty of cartridges?’ he questioned.

‘Plenty cartridge.’

Biggles handed back the weapon. ‘Not cheap. But I can talk of price with Captain MacIrish. Tell me this. How long would it take to get guns if we agree on price?’

‘Two week.’

‘Good. I will see Captain MacIrish when he returns.’

‘What name I say?’

‘No names yet. I shall know when the captain is back.’

‘How you know?’

‘I shall see his schooner come in. We meet again. *Au revoir.*’

Somewhat to Bertie’s surprise they were allowed to go without question. He remarked on this to Biggles as they walked away.

‘I think the answer to that is by acting fast we’ve taken them by surprise. They haven’t had time to make inquiries about us. But they will, you can bet on that. They won’t take their eyes off us. That fellow we were talking to in the Castello isn’t an Arab. A half-breed perhaps. I imagine he’s left to take care of things while MacIrish is away. After all, they have to take chances in talking to strangers or they wouldn’t do any business. Anyhow, I think we have the information we wanted. As I see it, Vaucher, acting for Brandt, has bought two hundred Belgian carbines, army disposal stuff, for about six

pounds apiece. They're not worth more than a pound apiece, but on top of that there's transport and the risk of losing the lot if the Customs people of any country caught them in transit. It's from sources like this that unscrupulous traders are able to supply irresponsible natives and so start all sorts of trouble. I'd say the guns Brandt bought are now on their way to the West Indies. The sooner we get back to Gib now the better.'

'How do you suppose MacIrish gets hold of these rifles? No respectable port authority would let them go through.'

'Bribery and corruption, perhaps. It's likely that MacIrish has an agent in Europe who buys the guns. No doubt he could arrange for them to be loaded on a freighter to be picked up by appointment with the *Queen Pat* somewhere on the high seas. But never mind that. It doesn't matter how it's done. We'll collect our kit from the hotel and beat it back to Europe. Frankly, I wouldn't trust any one of the people we've spoken to this morning. They'd sell anyone or anything to the highest bidder.'

Reaching the hotel, Biggles collected their key at the desk, where the clerk gave them no more than a disinterested glance, and going on to their room on the first floor they began putting their things together. With his pyjamas and small kit on the bed, Biggles unlocked and raised the lid of his light travelling case. Suddenly he stiffened, staring at the contents. Turning back to Bertie he touched him on the arm and raised a finger to his lips. He then went on to the bathroom door and with a jerk threw it wide open. He looked inside and came back into the bedroom.

'What's going on, old boy?' asked Bertie, looking mystified.

'My case has been opened,' answered Biggles, grimly.

CHAPTER 6

FAST WORK

THERE was a brief silence.

‘Are you sure about this?’ asked Bertie in a low voice.

‘Certain. I always know exactly how I leave my things. It’s become a habit.’

‘Didn’t you lock the case?’

‘Of course I locked it. But that hasn’t prevented someone from opening it.’

‘Anything missing?’

‘No. There was nothing in the case worth pinching — that is, nothing of any value to anyone except me.’

‘Then there’s no harm done.’

‘Just about as much harm as possible.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘My passport and Interpol Carnet were tucked in the folds of my spare shirt. They’ve been moved. That means someone has had a look at them.’

Bertie grimaced. ‘Why leave them here?’

‘Why not? The case was locked. The door was locked. Apart from not wanting them cluttering up my pockets, it seemed safer to leave the things than have them on me. We were going to the Hotel Castello. I didn’t feel like taking them there. Had we been grabbed and searched, when it was discovered we were police officers we’d never have got out of the place alive. Murder here is almost an industry.’ Biggles shrugged a shoulder. ‘Well, the mischief is done. Let’s face it. We must have been suspect for my case to have been opened, and whoever did that must know who and what we are.’

‘That fellow at the desk must know something about it. He could be a spy.’

‘You can say that of anyone in Tangier, in his position. Information is always worth money and a lot of people dabble in it as a sideline. Not only here, but in other places in Europe I could name. It’s no use talking to any of the staff here. We’d get nothing out of them. It’s better for us to behave as if we didn’t know our stuff had been searched. We may still have time to get clear before the MacIrish lot come looking for us with knives.’

‘Why MacIrish in particular?’

‘Because our inquiries here have been about him and his headquarters in the Castello. They’ll understand the meaning of our questions this morning. We know too much.’

Bertie was polishing his eyeglass. ‘Too true — too true. Well, what’s the drill?’

‘Just a minute.’ Biggles went to the door, opened it an inch or two, peeped out, closed it again and locked it. ‘There’s a man standing at each end of the corridor so it looks as if they’re already on the job. They may not try anything

inside the hotel, but we couldn't leave by the main entrance without being seen and followed.'

Bertie looked dubious. 'Do you really think they'd try to bump us off?'

'Knowing as much as we do I've no doubt about it. With all big gangs fear is cultivated as a weapon. Knowing the crooks are organised for murder, honest men are afraid to talk for fear of the consequences. That applies everywhere.'

Biggles went over to the full length french window. It opened on to a small balcony. Below was the street. 'No use,' he decided. 'Too many people about. We'd be taken for thieves and there'd be an outcry,' he told Bertie. 'Let's have a look at the bathroom.'

They went through, and from the window looked down into what were obviously the back premises of the hotel; from the smell of cooking that floated up, the kitchen quarters. There was a drop of about twelve feet into a small courtyard occupied by dustbins, stacks of cartons, empty bottles and similar refuse. There was no one there. An opening in the far wall gave access to a side street from which came the noise and bustle of a market.

'This looks like it,' said Biggles. 'If we can get clear we'll make for a garage and try to get a car to take us to the airport. We might be able to charter a plane to take us across to Gib.. Failing that I'd take a seat on a regular service going anywhere and work back to Gib. later.'

Biggles's eyebrows went up as the telephone rang. He unhooked the old-fashioned receiver mounted on the wall. 'Yes. Who is it?'

The voice of the reception clerk answered. 'There is a gentleman here asking to see you, sir.'

'What's his name?'

'He says he is an officer from police headquarters.'

'Well, I can't see anyone at the moment. I'm just having a bath. Can't he tell me his business on the telephone?'

'He says it's a personal matter, sir.'

'In that case he'll have to excuse me for a few minutes while I get dressed. I'll call you when I'm ready.'

'Yes, sir.'

Biggles hung up. 'Did you hear that?' he asked Bertie.

'Yes.'

'What do you make of it? I've gained a little time, anyway.'

'It might be the police.'

'What police?'

'It could be Marcel trying to contact us from Paris.'

Biggles shook his head. 'I don't believe it. Had Marcel wanted to speak to us he would have put through the call direct. He knew we were coming here. He recommended the place. I can think of no reason why he should ask the local police to call on us when he could just as easily have spoken direct to the hotel. This smells fishy to me. It may be someone confirming that we're still

here.'

'It may be the local police. Nothing to do with Marcel. As the Hotel Castello has such an unsavoury reputation they may wonder what we were doing there this morning.'

'That may be the answer; but I'd rather have nothing to do with the local police. No good could come of it. Questions might lead to complications. We might even find ourselves held here. No. We have the information we came here to get so I see no sense in taking a chance. My one concern now is to get back to Gib., and every hour we stay here now is likely to make that more difficult.'

'Okay, old boy. I leave it to you.'

'Then let's get weaving. The front door would be asking for trouble so—' Biggles broke off as from the direction of the door came a slight scraping sound. Looking, they saw the handle slowly turning. Then the door creaked as if pressure was being applied from the outside.

Biggles caught Bertie's eye and raised a beckoning finger. 'They're getting impatient,' he said softly. 'Let's go.'

They went to the bathroom window.

'It's a bit of a drop,' observed Bertie, looking down. 'No time to break a leg, or that sort of nonsense.'

Biggles went back and pulled a sheet off one of the beds. 'This should make things easier,' he said, knotting one end through the back of the bathroom chair and throwing the other end out of the window. 'Down you go. I'll drop the kit to you and follow on.'

Bertie put a leg over the sill and went hand over hand down the improvised rope. When he was down Biggles dropped the cases to him, went down himself, and together they made for the opening into the street.

Just as they reached it a man, an Arab, came round the corner in such a hurry that he almost collided with them. His purpose was made plain when he let out a cry and would have barred their way; but Bertie fetched him a smart clip under the jaw which sent him sprawling among the ashcans. He was up in a flash, a dagger in his hand. Bertie snatched up a dustbin lid. Using it as a shield he fended off the blow aimed at him and then hit the Arab on the head with it. The man reeled backwards against a pile of empty cartons. They came down with a run half burying him.

'Come on,' snapped Biggles, snatching the opportunity to get clear.

Leaving the Arab extricating himself they hurried from the yard into the street, which they then saw was one end of an open-air fruit and vegetable market. Nobody took any notice of them as they strode on down the middle of it, mingling with the crowd, to the far end, which turned out to be a broad, busy street, with a fair amount of traffic. Along this they made their way, but had to go some distance before they came to what Biggles was looking for — a garage. The manager was a European, probably a Frenchman as he greeted them in that language, asking what he could do for them.

Biggles wanted to know if a car was available to take them to the airport as he was in a hurry to catch a plane.

To his relief he was assured there would be no difficulty and the genial proprietor went off to make arrangements.

While they were waiting Biggles watched the street. 'I don't think we've been followed,' he said. 'That market was as good a place as any to lose a shadower.'

In a few minutes they were on their way, a native driver at the wheel taking chances that made his passengers wince. Not that there was anything unusual about that, native drivers being notoriously casual with mechanical transport. However, with the luck these fellows seem to have, the passengers arrived at their destination unharmed. The driver was paid off, with a tip that made him beam, and Biggles went on, now looking for an air-operating company.

Seeing two police officers he went over to them and asked their advice, saying it was important that he should be in Gibraltar as soon as possible. To save explanations he showed his Interpol identity card, which had the desired effect, and they were escorted to the offices of a French charter service. There, after the usual formalities, matters were soon arranged, with the result that less than an hour later they were checking in on the aerodrome at Gibraltar.

Said Biggles, looking across the water at the North African coast: 'We're well out of that. I'd say we were away just in time.' As they walked on towards their own aircraft he continued: 'The next thing is to find the *Cordelia*, and that may be more difficult.'

'When do we start?'

'Tomorrow I hope. I'll make a signal right away to the Air Commodore telling him we've been able to confirm what we suspected. He'll understand what that means. I'll follow it up with a letter giving details. By air mail he should get it in a couple of days. Now we'd better find Algy and Ginger and give them the gen over something to eat.'

CHAPTER 7

ISLA SANTINA

The formation of the organization known as the International Police Commission (Interpol for short) did more than bring together the combined police forces of the member countries and so make available to each the information held by all. It facilitated the movements of the personnel, the individual officers, engaged in the work of investigating criminal activities. For the aviation section it provided servicing and refuelling arrangements almost everywhere, and did away with the inevitable delays to which the private traveller is subjected when crossing frontiers; the Customs and currency barriers, for example.

Without such facilities it would not have been possible for Biggles or his pilots to move about the world as they did. In the ordinary way the voyager is 'checked' into any country he may visit, his passport being stamped with the date of entry. The same happens when he leaves. Thus, with the dates of entry and exit recorded, the police authorities know what foreigners are in their country at any time. Wherever the traveller sleeps for the night the passport must be produced. An entry is made in the hotel register, so the police are always in touch. This may seem a complicated system but on the whole it works very well, and is as much in the interest of the legitimate traveller as to the country concerned.

For only a few people are these restrictions relaxed, and certain police officials are among them, otherwise they would be handicapped in their work. Biggles was one of these privileged persons, and this note is made to explain why he was able to undertake journeys by air which in the ordinary way would not be possible for the owner of a private aircraft who, apart from having to pay landing fees every time he puts down his wheels, is forever required to fill in forms for one reason or another. In short, private air travel is not as easy as some people may imagine, and without the special papers he carried, Biggles's progress from Gibraltar to the West Indies would have taken much longer than it did.

Flying the short air route across the Atlantic, from Dakar in West Africa to Natal in Brazil, he then turned north up the main coastal track, and with night stops at Trinidad and Jamaica was able to reach his immediate objective, Nassau in the Bahamas, on the fifth day of the flight.

A day for a very necessary rest, and another for a top overhaul of the *Gadfly*, and all was ready for the task of locating the *Cordelia*, if, in fact, the yacht was there to be found. It will be understood that the original purpose of tracking the runaway millionaire had become secondary. The object behind this, to spark off a revolution — as it now appeared from what Biggles had learned — was more important, particularly as there was reason to think the

operation was to be conducted from a British island. The political repercussions of such an event might be very serious indeed.

The crew of the *Gadfly* had this advantage. They were familiar with much of the area of sea and land over which they would have to fly, for only a year or two earlier they had spent some time on a similar search.¹ On that occasion they had explored some of the larger islands, notably Andros and the two Inaguas, having made landings there in their old amphibian, the *Otter*.

Their base would remain Nassau, capital of the Bahamas, on the island of New Providence. Also to their advantage was the fact that the entire archipelago of the Bahamas, comprising three thousand islands, large and small, was British owned. The number of islands that might have to be searched for the missing yacht was a formidable proposition, although this would have been worse had it not been for the clue which indicated the old volcanic crater of Isla Santina.

The first thing to be done, Biggles had decided, was locate the *Cordelia*. To recognize it beyond any shadow of doubt was obviously not going to be easy. Identification would only be possible from very close quarters, for it was not to be supposed that the yacht would look anything like the smart white craft that had slipped out of Falmouth harbour. Yet not until this had been established could the next step be decided.

Biggles had cabled his arrival at Nassau to the Air Commodore, giving him the name of the small hotel at which they had found accommodation. 'Tomorrow,' he told the others, 'we'll have a look at Isla Santina.'

'You're not going to tell the Governor here, or the police, what we're doing?' questioned Algy.

'No. Not yet, anyway. If word got out of what we think Brandt's doing, the balloon would go up and the whole area start buzzing like a beehive with a wasp in it. We're not far from Cuba. We've no proof that's where Brandt intends to cause trouble, but that's the most likely place. At the moment I'm not thinking beyond finding the *Cordelia*. That's plenty to go on with. If we can do that I shall report to the Air Commodore and wait for orders. The next move will be up to him.'

'You mean, you won't try to put a spoke in Brandt's wheel on our own account,' said Ginger.

'That would be a tall order. If he's bought two hundred rifles it means he must be expecting that number of troops to carry them.'

'What I want to know, old boy, is just how we're going to start looking for the *Cordelia*,' remarked Bertie.

'Naturally, I shall start with Isla Santina. Flying by dead reckoning I shall go straight to the island and fly over at about two thousand. I hope to spot the *Cordelia*, or a ship of her build, in the central lagoon. She won't be in the open. For one thing the water's too deep for an anchorage. That means, if she's there, she's more likely to be moored tight in against the shore. If Brandt's there he's not likely to take any notice of an aircraft passing straight

over. It'd be a different matter if we went in low and started circling, obviously making a reconnaissance. If there's a ship there, the next step will be to get close enough to identify her without being seen ourselves. How that's going to be done, frankly, I don't know. It'll be difficult; probably decided by the general lay-out of the place. But it will have to be done somehow. We can't afford to take chances. I mean, we've got to be absolutely certain that the ship, if there's one there, is the *Cordelia*, before we send out the alarm. Don't forget, all sorts of vessels use these waters. There's a Greek colony on Andros, for instance, that runs a sponge-collecting industry.'

'And what if we find nothing at Isla Santina?' queried Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. 'In that case I shall land and look around for signs of the *Cordelia* having been there. She may have been and gone. If so, we shall have to find out where she's gone.'

'Which means a general search of the other islands?'

'I'm afraid so. Put it like this. Either we're wrong or we're right about the whole business. If we're wrong, we can pack up and call it a bad show. If we're right, then the *Cordelia* must be somewhere in the region, presumably at the base from which the revolution will be launched. But we could go on guessing until we were blue in the face and still not get the right answer. Let's take first things first, and that, in this case, is Santina Island. When we've been there we may know something definite. If the weather remains fair, and it probably will at this time of the year, we'll make an early start.'

And so it came about that sun-up the following morning found the *Gadfly*, with full tanks, heading out into the blue on a course for the lonely, uninhabited island of Santina. Below, strung out like an emerald necklace, lay a section of the six hundred mile long crescent of tropic islands which are known as the Bahamas.

There was a little shipping about, mostly small local craft, as would be expected in waters so well furnished with islands; but as the *Gadfly* pressed on farther away from any land, these craft became more widely separated, until at last on the whole vast surface of the tranquil sea there was not a sail in sight.

'I imagine the water is too deep for spongers,' remarked Biggles. 'As it involves diving, most of it is confined to shallow areas near the islands.'

'That must be Santina,' observed Ginger, a little while later, as a purple hump crept up over the horizon dead ahead.

'There's nothing else there so it must be.'

Slowly the island took shape and colour, a jewel set in a sapphire sea.

From a closer view it appeared as a fairly large, roughly circular, rugged mass of rock, from which the centre had been scooped out with a giant spoon, so that the whole thing looked lopsided. That is to say, on the one side the rock rose almost sheer to a height of several hundred feet. This was also the widest part of the land. From this towering pile of what presumably was solidified volcanic lava, the level fell away on both sides to form what was not much more than a rim; the rim of a great natural basin filled with water of the

deepest ultramarine blue. This rim diminished in height and width until it tapered off altogether, leaving a gap just wide enough for a ship of fair size to enter the central lagoon. The depth of this could be judged by its colour. It was obviously much deeper than the surrounding sea, which varied between cobalt and several shades of green.

The land, considering that most of it could only be rock, carried a surprising amount of vegetation, almost all of it the harsh types of plants found where the rainfall is low. With the exception of a few wind-torn palms, it comprised mostly what appeared to be cactus of one form or another.

The entrance to the lagoon, not more than fifty feet wide, might have been a stage set, so attractive was it in an artificial way. On one side the rock rose to form a hump from which sprang a group of tall coconut palms leaning outwards from a central point. Some hung far over the gap itself, their fronds, bursting like green rockets, forming a spectacular archway.

In short, the place looked exactly what it was, a volcano which at some time in the past had blown out its heart in a mighty explosion expended sideways rather than directly upwards — a formation not uncommon in the West Indian islands which are mostly of volcanic origin. Outside the perimeter of this natural bowl the open sea showed hardly a ripple. Inside, the water, protected by its encircling wall, lay as flat as a sheet of glass.

‘Well, there it is,’ remarked Ginger, while they were still a few miles away. He was sitting beside Biggles. ‘We should soon know the answers.’

Biggles did not reply. He was peering ahead.

‘What are you looking at?’ asked Ginger, perceiving that he was concentrating on something.

‘I thought I saw a smudge of smoke.’

‘I can’t see it.’

‘Neither can I, now. It may have been haze. Watch.’

Ginger would have said at once there was no ship in the lagoon, for everything was so clear and bright it seemed impossible that even a canoe could escape observation. With the sun almost directly overhead there were no shadows. Nothing moved. Apart from a few gulls drifting about, the whole place looked dead.

Biggles, having retarded the throttle a little to reduce speed, flew straight on across the lagoon. He did not turn. The island began to drop away astern.

‘Nothing doing,’ said Ginger. ‘There’s nothing there.’

‘I wouldn’t swear there was nobody there. Ask the others if they noticed anything of interest.’

Ginger went aft and did so. ‘Not a thing,’ he said, when he returned.

Biggles shook his head. ‘I could have sworn I saw a faint smudge of smoke as we approached.’

‘As the thing’s volcanic there might be an odd puff of smoke from a crack.’

‘Not a puff. Smoke from such a source should be more or less constant.

Why should it die away as we drew near?’

‘You think someone had a fire and doused it when he heard us?’

‘That’s what it looked like to me. If there is someone there, why put the fire out? A party of honest fishermen would have no reason to do that.’

‘What about a castaway?’

‘Surely he’d be more likely to make as much smoke as possible, to attract our attention.’

‘The *Cordelia* isn’t there, that’s quite certain,’ declared Ginger.

Biggles did not answer.

By this time the *Gadfly* was well out over the sea, with the island astern. It began a wide turn.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger.

‘What I said I’d do if the *Cordelia* wasn’t there. Go down and look round for signs of her having been there. It shouldn’t take long. There are not many places where it would be easy to step ashore. A ship would hardly tie herself under a sheer face of rock. It would be more likely to find a mooring where anyone on board could go ashore, if only to stretch his legs. We’ll go back and have a closer look.’

The *Gadfly*, losing height, returned to the island and made a circuit.

‘See anything?’ Biggles asked Ginger, when the circle had been completed.

‘Not a thing.’

‘It’s certainly hard to believe there can be anyone there,’ asserted Biggles. ‘A boat of some sort would be needed to get here, and if there was a craft of any sort we’d see it.’

‘Unless it had been carefully camouflaged.’

‘If that’s the case, it isn’t much use looking for it from up here. I’m going down, otherwise we shall be faced with the job of fiddling about here for weeks.’

So saying, Biggles cut the engines, and after dropping off more height in a short glide seaward, made his approach, heading for the gap that gave access to the lagoon. ‘Keep your eyes skinned and tell me if you see anything,’ he said, as they glided through, flattening out for the landing.

For a moment or two longer Biggles held the machine off. Then the keel kissed, cutting a short furrow on the surface of the calm water, causing no more disturbance than if it had been brushed by the wing of a swooping gull.

An instant later, as the aircraft sank again for the final touchdown, from somewhere not far away came the staccato stutter of a machine gun. Simultaneously something struck the aircraft a stinging crack, like the lash of a whip used in anger.

Biggles’s reaction was instantaneous and automatic. Both hands moved. The left flicked on full throttle. The right pulled the control column back into his stomach. At the same time his left foot kicked on rudder. The result was a violent change of direction, a flattish climbing turn that jammed Ginger against the side of the cockpit and sent the machine skidding towards the

lowest part of the rock wall that surrounded them. There was another burst of fire as he cleared the top, but the machine was not struck. The next instant Biggles had turned on a wing tip, and holding the machine low, was racing to the right close to the steepening wall. Reaching the highest part he brought the aircraft to even keel, cut the engines, and glided to a landing tight against the cliff.

As the machine rocked to a standstill he snapped: 'See if they're all right behind. If they are, try to find where that bullet struck. Watch for petrol in case it got a tank. Make haste.'

Ginger went aft into the cabin, throwing an anxious glance towards the top of the cliff to see if the gunman could reach them from there. He was relieved to observe there was just enough overhang to prevent that. He found Bertie and Algy on their feet. 'Where did that bullet hit?'

'Okay. No harm done.' Algy pointed to a splinter in the upper part of the hull towards the tail.

'Stand fast.'

'What's Biggles doing? What's the idea of landing?'

'I don't know.'

Ginger hurried back to Biggles and reported.

'Did you see that sharpshooter?' asked Biggles.

'No.'

'Any idea of the direction from which the shooting came?'

'Not a clue.'

'Did the others see anything?'

'No. They hadn't time to look. They went on the floor when you did that split-air turn. What do you make of it?'

'I don't know, but I'm going to find out. I can only think the *Cordelia* is away and someone has been left on guard.'

'Guarding what?'

'That's what I'm going to find out.'

'How?' Ginger's eyes saucered.

'By having a look round.'

'But they must know we're down. They'd hear the engines cut.'

'Fetch the others.'

Bertie and Algy came forward.

'Listen,' said Biggles, tersely. 'We've got about ten minutes. It'll take that gunman a minute or two to climb to the top of the cliff to see what's happened to us. By then the machine should be away. Launch the dinghy. Ginger and I are staying here. The enemy won't see us tight under the cliff. When the machine goes they'll assume we've all gone. After being shot at they won't reckon on anyone staying here. Get cracking on the dinghy. Don't forget water.'

Algy looked aghast. 'Do you seriously mean we're to push off and leave you here?'

‘That’s what I said.’

‘But why?’

‘I want to have a look at this Johnnie who had the infernal impudence to shoot at us, and find out why he did it. Something’s going on here, and before I leave I’m going to know what it is.’

‘How do you reckon to do that?’

While the rubber dinghy was being launched and inflated, Biggles went on: ‘When it gets dark I shall go ashore with Ginger and do a spot of scouting. I was right about that smoke. Better put a few biscuits in the dinghy, Ginger. We shan’t find anything to eat here. Put this in your pocket, too. You may need it.’ From the locker Biggles took two automatics and some spare clips of cartridges. He handed one to Ginger. ‘We’ll teach these smart-alecs to take pot shots at strangers,’ he added grimly, as he slung a pair of binoculars over his shoulder.

‘What exactly do you want us to do?’ asked Algy.

‘Push off. Return to base. Come back tomorrow morning and look for us. We’ll make a signal if we can. If you don’t see us, go home and try again the next day. This spot where we are now will be the rendezvous. Be careful of that gunman. In fact, you’d better not come too close unless you see me wave my handkerchief. If you see nothing it’ll mean we’re not ready to leave. In that case keep clear and try again later. We shall be here if it’s possible. I think it’s the best place.’

Algy did not argue. ‘Okay,’ he said briefly.

Biggles and Ginger got into the dinghy and pushed it clear.

‘Off you go,’ Biggles told Algy.

The *Gadfly*’s engines came to life and in a minute the machine was racing away across the open sea, leaving the dinghy rocking in its wake.

Ginger was fully prepared for gunshots from the high ground above them, but none came.

Biggles picked up a paddle and took the dinghy tight in against the towering cliff. This done he shipped the paddle and pulled the little craft along by hand to a place where the rock had been worn away by the action of the waves to form a slight cavity.



Biggles took the dinghy tight in against the cliff

‘We should lie snug enough here,’ he observed. ‘That is, provided the sea stays as it is. If a breeze got up and blew the water about it wouldn’t be funny.’

This was a possibility that hadn’t occurred to Ginger and he wished Biggles hadn’t mentioned it. Otherwise, as he had said, the place was snug, in that they could not be seen from the island itself.

‘You’re going to stay here till it’s dark?’ he queried.

‘Yes. Till the moon rises. If the people here light a fire we should be able to spot exactly where they are. I say “people” because I can’t see one man left here on his own.’

Silence fell, a silence broken only by the soft whisper of wavelets caressing the rock. A large red crab came out of its hole to inspect them. The day wore on.

Ginger found no difficulty in passing the time, for below him was a fascinating spectacle of which he never tired. Gazing down into the liquid turquoise and jade on which the dinghy rested he watched the shoals of brilliantly coloured fish, mostly small, that passed in endless succession. He could see starfish, crabs and crayfish, walking on the bottom, which he knew from past experience was probably sixty feet down, although it looked no more than twenty. For nowhere in the world are the seas as clear as those around the smaller islands of the Bahamas, the extraordinary clarity being due to the penetrating tropical sunlight and the absence of rivers to discharge sediment or pollution.

Slowly the day died.

¹ See *Biggles in the Blue*.

CHAPTER 8

UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS

Dusk dimmed the scene. No ship had appeared on the limpid water. From the island came no sound. There was not much room in the dinghy, but otherwise it was comfortable enough, for the air was soft and warm.

Biggles and Ginger had of course discussed the situation from every possible angle; but it was mostly surmise. Only one thing was certain, and that was the presence on the island of at least one man with a machine gun. As ordinary people do not possess such weapons it could be assumed he was there for no good purpose. Biggles was of the opinion that he was not a European, but more likely a coloured man, who was either not very intelligent or had jumped at any excuse to use his gun.

‘As the fellow couldn’t possibly have known our purpose in coming here, I can’t understand why he shot at us,’ he said. ‘We hadn’t interfered with him. For all he knew we were casual explorers, naturalists perhaps, landing to have a look at the place.’

‘There must be something here he didn’t want anyone to see.’

‘That’s the most likely answer. What is it? Had the *Cordelia* been here I could understand why they didn’t want visitors. But as things are, why should the fellow go out of his way to try to murder strangers? That was what it amounted to. Why didn’t he merely keep out of sight until we went away? What would he have done, I wonder, had he shot us down?’

‘Presumably he would have left us to drown, or shot us if we tried to get ashore.’

‘To do what he did still strikes me as extraordinary behaviour. I can’t see a white man doing that. Surely he must realize that in acting as he did he’s defeated his object, if that was to try to make the place look unoccupied. Anyway, he missed us, and he must know we got away.’

‘He must have thought he’d got us cold or he wouldn’t have opened fire.’

‘I did some quick thinking as I dodged out of the lagoon,’ went on Biggles. ‘It seemed to me that our best chance of finding out what was going on was for two of us to stay here. It would have been more difficult to get back had we gone away. As it is, he’ll have to be a smarter man than I can give him credit for to guess that we’re still here.’

By this time it was dark, really dark, for the moon had not yet risen; but as more and more stars appeared to provide sufficient light to enable him to see what he was doing Biggles began to haul the dinghy, hand over hand, along the base of the cliff, looking for a place where it would be possible to get ashore. As he remarked, he had no intention of trying to scale the cliff, which was composed of jagged, cooled-off lava.

They had to go some distance to reach that part of the perimeter where the

cliff ended, and the rock sloped back at a reasonable angle to a maximum altitude that had diminished to perhaps a hundred feet. They went on a little farther until, finding a place that suited their purpose, they waited for the moon. It appeared in about an hour, with a slight halo round it.

Biggles frowned as he looked at it. 'I don't like the look of that ring round the moon,' he muttered. 'It could mean a change of weather. However, we shall have to take a chance on that.'

They made the dinghy secure, had a last drink of water and put a few biscuits in their pockets for an emergency. This done, they stepped ashore.

'We shall have to get to the top to be able to see the lagoon,' said Biggles, and he started off.

Neither of them expected the going to be easy. It turned out to be even worse than they had reason to suppose. Much of the rock underfoot was rotten, friable stuff, that broke easily into an unsuspected cavity, so there was some risk of an injured ankle. Cacti bristled everywhere; great clumps of bloated prickly pear, tall saqueros and barrel-shaped monstrosities like vegetable porcupines. There were groups of aloes, with long, bayonet pointed leaves, that were quite impenetrable, so detours had constantly to be made. Often Biggles stopped to study the silhouettes behind them, for, as he said, it was not going to be easy to find their way back to the dinghy, particularly if they had to retire in a hurry.

With one thing and another progress was slow, but in due course they reached the top, and there below them, beautiful and serene, with the moon reflected on its placid surface, lay the almost circular lagoon. From their position it was possible only to get a clear view of the far side. They stopped to survey it. No spark of light appeared against the inky background that was the far wall of rock.

Then, as they crouched, in order not to show themselves on the skyline, there came to their ears a sound as strange as it was unexpected. The soft strumming of a guitar.

'Can you make out where that's coming from?' whispered Biggles.

'Seems to be along there.' Ginger pointed towards the base of the highest part.

They moved towards it, slowly, and as quietly as the conditions permitted. They had not far to go. Perhaps a hundred yards. Then, topping a ridge, they saw some distance in front of them, on a flat piece of ground somewhat below them, the dull red glow of a smouldering fire. By staring it was just possible to see some figures, sitting or lying around it. The light was not good enough for them to be counted; nor could their faces be seen. Ginger reckoned the distance to be about seventy or eighty yards.

'Well, there they are,' breathed Biggles. 'I don't think we could hope to get any nearer without being heard.'

'So what do we do?'

'I think our best plan would be to wait here for daylight, when we might be

able to see what sort of people they are and what they're doing.'

'Okay.'

They found seats.

Hardly had they done so than Ginger went rigid as with a fearful prolonged crash, starting not far in front of them, a rock went rolling down the slope to end with a mighty splash in the lagoon. In the utter silence the noise seemed tremendous. Yet the extraordinary thing was, as the sound died away the guitar could be heard, still playing. This to Ginger seemed incomprehensible, for he would have imagined such a din enough to start an alarm. But the men round the fire hadn't moved. Neither had Biggles.

The explanation came a minute later when, following a soft patter of footsteps, the silhouette of an animal loomed up less than a dozen yards away. A pair of tall straight horns revealed what it was. A goat. It must have seen them, or smelt them, for with a snort it turned away and disappeared, sending more small pieces of rock rattling down the slope.

Ginger breathed again.

'There are goats, gone wild, on many of the islands,' said Biggles, softly. 'Cattle, too, on some of 'em.'

'Then that's why the people below took no notice of that crash.'

'It probably happens all the time. They're used to it.'

After a short silence Biggles continued. 'We've settled one question. The *Cordelia* may not be here now, but she's been here; and she'll be coming back.'

'How do you work that out?'

'If she wasn't coming back these fellows wouldn't have been left here.'

'Couldn't they be fishermen, sponge fishers from Andros, for instance?'

'What would sponge fishers be doing with a machine gun? Besides, where's their boat? Sponge fishers work in pairs, in a small boat, from a parent schooner. I'd say the water is too deep here, anyway, for spongers. They seldom leave what they call The Mud, a shallow bank about two hundred miles long on the west side of Andros. Spongers could have no possible reason for shooting at us even if they had a gun. They're a poverty-stricken lot, and it takes them all their time to buy food, never mind firearms. No. The *Cordelia* has been here and has gone off on some errand. She'll come back. Had she gone off to start a revolution she wouldn't have left a machine gun behind.'

'How does that leave us?'

'Not in a strong position for doing anything. We may believe what I've just said but we can't prove it; and I'm not going to take the risk of triggering off an alarm until I can. That means we shall have to hang around here until the *Cordelia* does come back. When I see her, and I'm sure it is her, will be time for the Air Commodore to take over. The arrest of Brandt and his yacht would be too big a job for us to handle.'

'Instead of sitting here all night wouldn't it be better to go back to the

dinghy, and take turns to get some sleep, before coming back here about dawn?' suggested Ginger.

'I was just thinking the same thing. We ought to go back, anyhow. I'm not happy about the weather. The rock where we moored is pretty rough, and even a slight sea rubbing the dinghy against it might result in a puncture. You see what I mean?'

Ginger realized only too well what Biggles meant. Without the dinghy they would be marooned, for a rough sea would prevent the *Gadfly* from landing to pick them up. He looked at the moon, now riding high. The halo had gone. Instead, it now had a wisp of mist trailing across its face. He got up. 'We'd better go,' he said.

They made their way back to the dinghy, without any great difficulty, to find the fragile craft rocking gently, sometimes bumping against the rock. They discussed trying to get it ashore, but decided against it. It was too heavy to be lifted bodily, and to drag it might cause the puncture they were anxious to prevent. Biggles made a short excursion looking for a beach. Not finding one, all they could do was tie the dinghy absolutely fast in a position that made movement impossible. As Biggles said, there was nothing more to be done. Turning to Ginger he advised: 'You try to get a nap. I'll wake you in a couple of hours.'

Ginger stretched himself out on the warm rock, and although the position was far from comfortable, he was soon asleep.

He seemed hardly to have closed his eyes when Biggles was shaking his shoulder. 'Come on,' said Biggles. 'Time to be moving.'

Ginger, at once wide awake, sat up and looked around. The moon had gone, and the first flush of dawn was creeping up over the horizon. A slight breeze was ruffling the surface of the sea, but it was nothing to worry about. He stood up. 'Okay,' he said. 'I'm ready. Lead on.'

They set off. With the sky getting lighter every passing minute, the trip was much easier than it had been in the deceptive moonlight, when they had no idea of what was in front of them. Goat tracks were numerous, and once they found one leading in the right direction the walk became a simple matter, the goats of course having chosen a route free from obstacles. In ten minutes, from behind a clump of aloes, they were looking down from the ridge towards the place where they had seen the fire. The spot they were on was roughly half-way between the break in the reef and the highest point of the island, which ran steeply uphill on their right-hand side.

This, naturally perhaps, appeared to be the headquarters of the goats, for a small herd could be seen grazing between the cacti and other coarse vegetation. They were large, hairy beasts, the males with long beards. No attention was paid to them, for in the growing light there were more important things to look at. There was still no boat to be seen on the lagoon, its surface rippling in places where the dawn-breeze caressed it.

It could now be seen that the flat area on which the camp fire had glowed

was larger than had been realized in the darkness, probably because some of it had been hidden behind scrub. It was really in the nature of a rough level shelf, not very wide, but of fair length. On this the fire had been rekindled, presumably for the making of tea or coffee, and from it a column of pale blue smoke drifted along the flank of the hill. Men were moving about, casually and without haste, making it evident that they had no thought of being disturbed. Ginger counted six men, all dark-skinned in various shades of brown. A faint murmur of conversation floated up.

Biggles held his binoculars to his eyes for so long that Ginger asked him if it was some particular object that engaged his attention.

‘I can’t quite make out what’s happening down there,’ answered Biggles, in a puzzled voice. ‘From time to time some of the men seem to disappear. I can only think there must be a cave, or depression, in the rock behind them; perhaps a ravine, or a split in the hill, that would serve as a shelter in bad weather. Maybe that’s where they sleep. We can’t see it from here because we’re looking at it from the side. We could only get a full face view by going round to the far side of the lagoon.’

‘Are you going to do that?’

‘No. Not only would it be difficult but it would take too long. It would either mean clambering over the high ground, or, if we went the other way, swimming across the gap in the reef. The tide must cause a pretty stiff scour there, whichever way it’s running. Wait a minute. Those fellows look as if they’re going to do something.’

Looking, Ginger saw that every man was now armed with a firearm, gun or rifle: it was not possible to say which. ‘Where did they get those weapons?’ he asked. ‘I didn’t see them lying about.’

‘They fetched them from somewhere behind. It rather supports my belief that there’s a hole there, although we can’t see it from here.’

‘They’re loading. What on earth are they going to do?’ This operation could be heard as well as seen.

‘Don’t ask me,’ answered Biggles.

‘You don’t think they know we’re here and are coming to look for us?’

‘No. They’d be more on the alert if they thought someone was on the island. Watch.’

Sitting behind the aloes, peering between their long pointed leaves, they observed with mounting curiosity what appeared to be the beginning of a military operation. Four men went down to the water’s edge and in single file began working their way along the rocky shore towards the place where the side of the basin dropped and narrowed. After they had gone some distance the remaining two men — for it now seemed certain there were only six all told — began climbing the hill at an angle, apparently following a goat track, the general direction being towards the spot where Biggles and Ginger were squatting.

‘I don’t like this,’ muttered Ginger. ‘If they keep on they’ll see us. Hadn’t

we better move?’

‘I don’t think they’ll come as far as this.’

‘What reason have you for that?’

‘I have an idea of what they’re up to.’

‘What?’

‘Look at the goats. I fancy they know. I’d say this isn’t the first time this has happened.’

The animals had stopped grazing, and with heads erect were staring down at the men coming up the hill. After a minute or two of this they began to move off, hesitatingly, as if uncertain which way to go. Always their attention was on the two men now climbing steeply to get in a position behind them. The goats began to move faster.

‘I get it,’ said Ginger. ‘This is a goat hunt. The men are pot hunting.’

‘That’s what it looks like. The two fellows coming this way, having got behind the goats to stop them from bolting in this direction, will drive them towards the four who have taken cover on the narrow part of the reef. The goats will then be the meat in the sandwich. Whichever way they go someone will get a shot. It’s easy to imagine the men are after a taste of fresh meat. That’s natural enough. Look at the goats. They’re ready to panic. They’ve had this trick played on them before.’

At this juncture, one of the two men, having got into a position behind the goats, fired a long shot. Apparently it missed. Perhaps a hit was not expected. The intention may have been to stampede the goats, in which case it succeeded. The hunters hurried on after them, driving them towards the four men concealed below.

‘Some of the goats will cop it,’ observed Ginger. ‘They’ll be caught between two fires.’

Biggles spoke tersely. ‘Never mind about the goats. This seems to be our chance to have a look at the camp. It’s bound to be some time before the men can get back. Time enough for me to get there.’

‘What about me?’

‘You stay here. There’s no need for us both to go. I shall see all there is to be seen. Watch what happens. If things go wrong, although I don’t see how they can, you may have to take a hand.’ Having said this, Biggles started diagonally down the slope, keeping low and taking advantage of the ample cover available.

Ginger watched, anxious, but not unduly worried, for there was common sense in what Biggles had said. The serious shooting had not yet begun, and it seemed reasonable to suppose the hunters would rest before starting back with any animals they had shot. They might even stop to clean and skin them, to save weight.

Biggles, about half-way to his objective, had disappeared behind a mass of prickly pear when Ginger heard the plane coming. This, of course, was to be expected. He looked up but couldn’t see it, his view being limited by the high

ground behind him. He could hear the machine for some minutes, and could imagine Algy and Bertie looking for them. Then the drone receded as the aircraft, having failed to spot them, withdrew.

Ginger looked again at the ground in front of him. He could no longer see Biggles. Nor could he see the hunters, they apparently having taken up positions where the goats would not be able to see them. There had still been no shooting, so it looked as if Biggles would have plenty of time to make his reconnaissance and get back.

The position remained unchanged for some minutes. Ginger watched, expecting at any moment to hear the shooting start as the goats blundered into the trap. Then, suddenly, for no reason that he could discover, the situation changed. There was a shout. The hunters rose up from their hiding places and hastened back towards the camp. The two on the high ground ran.

Ginger could only stare. What had happened? What had caused the men to abandon the hunt? He could think of only one reason, the obvious one. Biggles had been seen near the camp. Did he realize this? Probably not, because although he would have heard the shout he would suppose it to be concerned with the hunting. From his position much lower down the slope it was unlikely he would see the men hurrying back. It seemed likely, therefore, that he would be caught.

What to do for the best Ginger did not know. There was no way he could warn Biggles without exposing himself to the same danger, and he could see no advantage to be gained by that. So, torn by doubts and indecisions, he remained where he was. He knew that Biggles would, if he could, come back to him. Should he go to meet him, and they missed each other in the scrub, they would find it difficult to get together again. So in the end he did nothing.

It was one of the four men scrambling along the rocky shore who provided the answer to the mystery as to why the hunt had so suddenly been abandoned. He pointed. Naturally, Ginger turned his head to see what he was pointing at. Then he understood.

A ship was coming into the lagoon, passing slowly through the gap in the reef.

CHAPTER 9

TRAPPED

Biggles made his way to the camping ground with the caution for which the situation called, but also, knowing the men were away, with confidence. Like Ginger, he heard the *Gadfly* come and go without catching sight of it. That was in order and it did not worry him. It would come over again the next day.

He had nearly reached the camp, and had stopped to look at it before taking the last few steps, when he heard a distant shout. He took no notice of it, supposing it to be made by one of the hunters to scare the goats. As he was now on lower ground, where the vegetation was dense, he could not see them. The sound of shooting, he thought, would tell him when the hunt reached its climax. It was unlikely any of the men would return before that, so he went on to complete the reconnaissance.

What he saw when he reached the open ground was what he expected to see; the general litter of a well used camp; empty tins, bottles and the like. Blankets lay about where the men had been sleeping. Ignoring these things he went on to the sharply rising ground behind the camp, and there to his satisfaction he saw that he had been right about a cave. Actually, it was not so much a cave, in the generally accepted sense of the word, as a fissure, a flaw in the face of the rock, fairly high but narrow. Trampled ground round the entrance showed that it had been well used, possibly by goats before the men arrived.

He went in and saw that it ran some way back. Enough light came in through the entrance to show him all he needed to see, and, in fact, what he was more than half prepared to see.

The place was a store depot. Rifles were stacked along the wall. There were several sub-machine guns. Boxes of small arms ammunition and cases of hand grenades were piled beside cartons of canned food, mostly biscuits and 'bully' beef. The only thing that did surprise him was the quantity of stuff that had been stored. The purpose for which it was required would obviously be no casual skirmish. He picked up one of the rifles and found, as he expected, that it was one of the obsolete carbines he had been shown in Algiers. His expression was grim as he replaced it against the wall.

Flicking on his petrol lighter to serve as a torch he followed the cave to the end, a matter of perhaps twenty yards, where it dwindled to a mere crack. There was nothing there, so having seen all there was to see, he walked back towards the entrance, intending to return to Ginger forthwith.

He had nearly reached it when he was startled to hear the sound of hurrying footsteps on the rocks outside. This brought him to a halt. A man appeared outside, to stand with his back towards the cave as he stared down at

the lagoon below. A voice spoke and a second man joined the first. A brisk conversation in what was evidently a local language, ensued.

Biggles, his escape cut off, could only remain where he was, trusting the men would have no reason for entering the cave. Naturally, he hoped they would move off and so give him a chance to get away. Trouble at that moment was the last thing he wanted. Both men, still with their backs towards him as, gazing down at the lagoon, they spoke in low, urgent voices, carried rifles. There was every reason to suppose they were loaded.

Biggles could not imagine what had happened. What had brought the men back so quickly? There had been no shooting. They hadn't a goat. Had the hunt been called off? Apparently it had. Why? There must have been a reason. If that were so, the other four members of the party would also be on their way back. The only explanation he could think of was that Ginger had exposed himself and had been seen.

Biggles thought swiftly. He was in no immediate danger for it was obvious that his presence in the cave was unsuspected. The men still had their backs to him. They could be taken by surprise. With his automatic it would be a fairly easy matter to hold them up, force them to drop their rifles and so get clear. But there was a strong argument against such a plan. They would know he was on the island. There were six of them. They would come after him, when Ginger, too, would almost certainly be discovered. The aircraft had been and gone, so it was no use looking for help in that direction until the next day. What were the two men looking at with such interest?

They moved forward a little way and stopped again. They were still too close for him to hope to get clear without being seen, but the distance now between them and the cave did at least give him an opportunity to advance a little way without much risk of being heard. He moved forward. The lagoon came into view, and what he saw on it at once supplied the answer to the behaviour of the goat hunters. A ship had come in and was moving slowly towards a flat face of rock immediately below the camp as if it intended tying up there. It was a ready-made quay. What shook Biggles was the number of men swarming on the deck.

Was the ship the *Cordelia*? It was black, with two red funnels. Was one of them a dummy? But the ship was about the size of the *Cordelia*. Whether it was Brandt's yacht or some other craft the men ashore obviously knew all about it.

Biggles, pondering the situation, had a pretty good idea of what had happened. The *Cordelia*, assuming it was the *Cordelia*, having unloaded the weapons, leaving a small party on guard had gone off to fetch the men who were to use them. He abandoned all hope of trying to get away unseen. There were too many eyes about, for by this time the yacht had brought up against the rock and a line had been thrown ashore.

Biggles had one consolation. Ginger must be able to see all this and realize how he had been trapped. He would not be able to help, but at least he would

know what had happened, and so, with any luck, be able to pass on the information to those in the aircraft.

Some men had now come ashore from the yacht and were walking up the short hill towards the camp. The leading pair, in tropical kit, were white men. Biggles thought he recognized one of them. Brandt. The man with him he took to be the secretary, Vaucher, although he did not know him by sight. That, at all events, thought Biggles, settled any question of the identity of the ship. It could only be the *Cordelia*.

He was thinking swiftly, for it was clear that he had only a few minutes left in which to make up his mind. He resolved that rather than attempt a forlorn hope of getting away without being seen, in which failure would pronounce his guilt as a spy, it would be better to fall back on his old ally bluff. It would, moreover, be interesting to hear what Brandt had to say. Matters would not be helped if he was found inside the cave, for in that case it would be no use pretending to be ignorant of what it contained. So he strolled out, and walked a little way to one side, where, finding a convenient seat he sat down and lit a cigarette.

So far no one appeared to have noticed him. The two white men, accompanied by half-a-dozen well dressed companions, the colour of whose skins suggested they were Central Americans or West Indians, came on; and they had nearly reached the top of the rise that ended at the level ground when Brandt, looking up, saw him. That was apparent from the way he stopped dead in his tracks, staring, a frown creasing his forehead. He spoke sharply to those with him. There was a short argument. Then Brandt came on quickly, and he did not stop until he was standing square in front of Biggles. The expression on his face was one more of astonishment than hostility, which perhaps in the circumstances was understandable.

‘Who are you?’ He fired the question.

Biggles tapped the ash off his cigarette. ‘If you’re interested the name’s Bigglesworth, although I imagine that won’t mean anything to you.’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘About half-an-hour.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I might ask you that,’ returned Biggles, curtly, deciding to carry war into the enemy’s country. ‘What the devil do you mean by shooting at my aircraft?’

Brandt’s amazement was obviously genuine. Apparently he had not been told of the incident. Not that there had been much time.

‘Shooting? What shooting?’ he demanded. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Can’t a man take a cruise round the islands any more without being shot at by some trigger-happy lunatic with a gun?’

‘B— but—’

‘With some friends I was about to land here to have a look round what struck us as a fascinating spot, when somebody opened fire on us. Hit us, too.

We took a poor view of that so I came ashore to find out who was responsible. Seeing smoke I came here, to find everyone away on what looked like a goat hunt. That's all. If these men who shot at us are employees of yours, you might ask them what game they're playing at, shooting at strangers.'

'Have you reported this?'

'Not yet, but I shall unless I have an explanation and an apology.'

Brandt turned on the goat hunters, who by now had assembled at the camp, and asked who had done the shooting. From his tone of voice he was really angry, as he had reason to be, since, as he imagined, it had brought Biggles there. One of the men mumbled something about a gun going off by accident. Biggles could have pointed out that machine guns do not go off by accident, but he thought it more prudent to refrain from any mention of such weapons. Brandt turned back to him. 'Where's your plane now?'

'Gone to Nassau for petrol. It's coming back to pick me up.'

Brandt looked as if he didn't know what to say or what to do. 'I'm very sorry about all this,' he said. 'Excuse me a minute.' He took his white companion, the man Biggles thought must be Vaucher, on one side, and they spoke earnestly for some minutes, obviously trying to decide how to meet the situation. Biggles continued to smoke unconcernedly as if the matter was of no importance to him. Brandt, he imagined, was wondering if he had been in the cave, and had seen the arms stored there; but he did not want to mention it in case he hadn't.

Brandt came back. 'You're probably wondering what we're doing here with such a big gang of men, but the fact is I've taken a lease on the island and intend to clear the ground for fruit farming.'

'Good idea. I'm told it can be profitable.'

'That's why my men were trying to kill off the goats. They can do a lot of damage, eating the young trees, and so on. I'm sorry if one of the shots came your way.'

Biggles nodded. 'I understand. If you've taken a lease on the island it seems that we were trespassing on your property, although we were not to know that. It sort of makes things even. You won't mind if I hang around for a bit, until my friends come back to pick me up?'

'Not at all,' replied Brandt. 'I can't offer you any hospitality here, but I shall be going back to my schooner presently. If you care to come along I can give you a drink.'

'Thanks.' Biggles accepted, although to go on board the yacht was the last thing he wanted, realizing that once on board he might not be allowed back on shore. The question was, how to excuse himself. Brandt had not behaved badly so far, but Biggles knew that once he was suspected of being what he really was, he would be given no chance to escape. In any case, if Brandt knew he had seen what was inside the cave he would not dare to let him go, for fear he talked.

Then came the question Biggles feared would come. Looking him straight

in the face Brandt asked: 'By the way, have you been in the cave?'

Biggles affected surprise. 'Cave? What cave?' he inquired innocently.

'There's one not far behind you,' said Brandt. 'I'd keep clear of it. It's a dangerous place. The rock is soft and absolutely rotten. The roof may fall in at any time. I've warned my men to keep out.'

Biggles smiled. 'You needn't warn me. I'm nothing for caves. They give me claustrophobia.'

Brandt looked relieved. 'I thought I'd just mention it.'

'I'll write a note for my friends in case they should come before I'm off your yacht,' suggested Biggles.

Brandt waved the idea aside. 'No need for that. We shall hear the plane come and my fellows will tell your friends where you are.'

Seeing that there was no escape that way Biggles resigned himself to the inevitable. Better to allow things to remain as they were, he decided, than make a false move that would lead to open hostilities in which he would have no chance against so many. Wherefore, when presently Brandt said: 'Let's go down to the boat and have a drink,' he did not demur. He would at least be able to confirm that the yacht *was* the *Cordelia*, and check up on its new name if the old one had been changed, as he was pretty sure it had.

How, afterwards, he was to get away, for now that he had all the information he needed there was no reason to remain on the island, was a problem that would have to be left for the time being.

¹ This was a reasonable excuse, since the British Government does in fact let on lease some of the smaller islands of the Bahamas, the rent depending on the nationality of the applicant and the purpose for which the island is required. For natives who want the ground for general farming the rent is usually a nominal one.

CHAPTER 10

SHOCKS FOR GINGER

GINGER'S alarm when he saw the goat hunt abandoned, and the reason for it, can be imagined. All he could do was watch helplessly. For a few minutes he hoped Biggles would see the danger and make a dash back to him. He couldn't see him, and knowing nothing of the cave, the existence of which as far as he was concerned was mere conjecture, he wondered where he was and what he was doing.

The answer was provided when he suddenly reappeared, and far from bolting, sat calmly on a rock and lit a cigarette. When, a little later, he saw him in conversation with the men who had come ashore from the yacht, he didn't know what to make of it. Worse was to come. When he saw Biggles walking down the hill towards the yacht his concern became something like consternation. He could not imagine Biggles doing this of his own free will, yet so far there had been no sign of compulsion. But he felt there must have been. It was too much like the fly accepting the spider's invitation to 'come into his parlour'.

The last he saw of Biggles he was on the yacht, going below.

Time passed. The sun climbed over its zenith, doing its best to flay the island with its blistering rays. Ginger crawled into what little shade was provided by the aloes. He was hot, thirsty, uncomfortable and worried. He did not know what to do. In fact, he could think of nothing to do except stay where he was and watch events. He was afraid to go away in case Biggles reappeared and came up the hill to rejoin him. In the event of trouble he might make a break for it, relying on him for help should he be pursued.

Actually, the only reason Ginger had for leaving the spot was to go to the dinghy for a drink of water from the canteen which had been left there. It was no use expecting the aircraft. It wouldn't be likely to come back until the following day. What effect that would have on the situation he did not even try to guess, but he would at least have Algy and Bertie to talk to; and he needed companionship badly.

The day wore on, and with it came the climax to complete Ginger's solicitude. Men began to come ashore from the yacht. Scores of men, making their way up the hill towards the camp like a column of ants. With sombreros on their heads and dressed in multi-coloured shirts they looked like a mob of brigands. He knew they were on the yacht, of course, because he had seen them on deck, sitting and lying about doing nothing in particular. Without giving the matter much thought, he supposed them to be the partisans who were going to support the revolution, or whatever undertaking was projected. Such a number of men would not be necessary for any normal work. The question was, what were they going to do now? Were they merely coming

ashore to sleep?

Ginger had not long to wait for the answer to this new problem. The leading files of men reached the camping ground and disappeared, seemingly having walked into the face of the hill. Within a minute they had reappeared, now with loads on their shoulders, and started on the return journey to the yacht. Some carried boxes; some carried rifles, sometimes several. Some of the boxes were so heavy that they needed two men to carry them.

Now Ginger understood. Biggles had been right. There was a cave, or a cleft in the rock, where these sinister-looking objects had been stored. The yacht had been away somewhere to fetch the men. Now it had returned, and the implements of war were being put on board. Was the vessel on the lagoon the *Cordelia*? Ginger didn't know, and he didn't particularly care. If it was not the *Cordelia* it was obviously another ship engaged in the same enterprise. He was still puzzled. Biggles must have seen these things in the cave, or whatever it was. Why had he done nothing about it? Why hadn't he returned? How was it, having seen this secret armoury, he had apparently been able to remain on good terms with the conspirators to whom they belonged? Why hadn't these men, who obviously intended to start a war somewhere, shot Biggles out of hand, or at least made him a prisoner? He had seen too much, and they would not dare to leave him free to report what was afoot.

There were, of course, answers to these questions, but Ginger, not surprisingly, did not know what they were. All he could think, as he watched the men trailing back to the yacht with their loads, was this: with the men, and their weapons, on board, there was no reason for the ship to remain in the lagoon. It was all ready to move off. It was unlikely that it would have loaded up the war equipment so quickly had it intended to remain in the lagoon for any length of time. It might even set sail right away. That night. Taking Biggles with it.

This thought nearly threw Ginger into a panic. He watched the yacht as the last of the men went over the side and down the companion-way, fully expecting to see her cast off. He breathed more freely when this did not happen.

Why hadn't it happened? There was no one left on shore. He thought there must be a reason. A thought struck him, and he turned his attention to the shore line. The high water mark, clearly indicated by dark-coloured seaweed, told him what he wanted to know. The tide was at full ebb. He did not know the depth of the water at the one break in the reef. Nor did he know how much water the yacht needed. But he did know that if this was in fact the *Cordelia* she must by now be fully loaded, and would need a fair depth of water to get out. She had taken on a big load of stores before she had left Falmouth. Now she had taken aboard an even heavier load; he knew that from what he had seen. Some of the boxes, presumably ammunition for the guns, had needed two men to carry them. Boxes of cartridges are heavy stuff. And on top of that there were now far more men on board than a yacht would normally carry.

Thus pondered Ginger as, worried by flies and bitten by ants, sweating with heat and anxiety, he sat on the hillside, trying to work out what, if anything, he could do. He felt sure now that the ship was only waiting for high tide to pass through the reef. That gave him a few hours' grace.

And there was always a chance, although he did not set much store on it, of Biggles being allowed to come ashore. But the longer this was delayed, he thought, the less chance there was of that. Brandt, or whoever was in charge of the ship, had got him where he wanted him; and intended to keep him there. He could not imagine Biggles staying voluntarily on the ship for so long, knowing that he, Ginger, was waiting for him. No. Had Biggles been free to go he would have been back long before this.

In half-an-hour, with the sun dropping like an enormous red balloon behind the reef, Ginger had made up his mind. He would have to risk losing sight of the ship for a little while, to return to the dinghy. There he would have a much needed drink and eat some biscuits. He would write a note for Algy telling him what had happened and put it where he could not fail to see it, probably on the dinghy itself, when he came over the next morning.

Ginger felt sure that, failing to see them by the dinghy, Algy, suspecting something was wrong, would fly low, if he did not actually land. If possible, he would make a signal to him. If Algy spotted the yacht, supposing it was still there, although this was by no means certain, he would guess what had happened and act accordingly. If the yacht had left, there would be no difficulty in waving him down. Together they would be able to pick up the yacht, check its course, and report to the authorities, probably to the Governor of the Bahamas at Nassau.

Ginger waited until night fell before he moved, making the most of the remaining daylight to write the message to Algy on two pages of his notebook. Then, as the yacht showed no signs of moving off he made his way back to the dinghy, confident that was where Biggles would look for him should he get away.

He found the dinghy just as it had been left, and was relieved to note the sea was still dead calm with no indication of it being otherwise. He had a good drink and munched his biscuits pensively, more as a matter of course than because he was hungry. This done, he had a last look at the dinghy, making sure it was secure, and put the letter under a stone in a conspicuous place. To make more certain it would not be overlooked, using the spine of an old palm frond as a staff, he made a little flag of his handkerchief, jamming the palm stick into a crevasse in the rocks so that it stood erect.

Satisfied that he could do no more for the time being, he made his way back to the position where he had spent most of the day. He had every intention, of course, of returning to the dinghy in the morning as soon as he heard the aircraft coming, always assuming that was possible. What he had done was really a precautionary measure in case something happened to prevent it. He was prepared for anything.

Taking the original seat he saw the yacht was still there. It carried no riding lights, but others showed the position of some of the portholes. For the rest, the scene was as lovely as a picture, and in different circumstances he would have asked nothing more than to be allowed to gaze at it. The moon, reflected in the water, the silhouette of the palms against the sky, the silence, everything seemed to conspire to make the place enchanting. He felt that had he not known the yacht was there, he would have had the world to himself.

Time marched on, slowly, as if in no hurry to begin another day. High tide came and began to retire, and still the yacht showed no signs of leaving. Occasionally a vague shadow appeared on deck, nothing more. The people aboard might have gone to bed for all they did to make their presence known. Of one thing Ginger was now certain. If Biggles was still on board, and he could think of nowhere else he might be, he was not there willingly.

He could not have said exactly when or why the thought occurred to him to investigate more closely on the off-chance that he might learn something; but it did, and fortified by the knowledge that, should he be caught, Algy would learn the facts from his note, he began a careful descent to the yacht. He assumed there would be a routine watch on deck; but even when, moving stealthily from cover to cover, he was close, he could still see no sign of one. With such people discipline would be slack, he thought, and it was quite possible the watch was sleeping.

He stopped, for he had no intention of going on board. That, he felt, would be asking for trouble. It was unlikely that he would be able to locate Biggles anyway, and that of course was his main purpose in going near the ship. He had a vague idea that he might overhear a conversation, or see the interior of the yacht through one or more of the lighted portholes.

He was standing behind a tall 'candlestick' cactus, as near as he dare go for the moment, when a faint sound came to his ears. At first he thought an electric device had been started somewhere in the ship; but he soon saw this was not so. A hail floated across the water, and turning his eyes in the direction whence it came he saw a launch, a sizable cabin cruiser, coming into the lagoon. That the hail had been heard was revealed by a sudden activity on the yacht. Lights appeared. Voices spoke. The hail was answered.

Ginger's first reaction, naturally, was astonishment at a development so unexpected; but after a few moments' reflection he saw there was nothing remarkable about it. The island was the rendezvous, the meeting place for everyone engaged in the conspiracy. His plan for trying to locate Biggles collapsed like a pricked balloon. With all this going on it would be futile to look for Biggles now. The reason why the yacht had not set sail was evident. It had waited for the arrival of the motor boat. Whom had it brought? Obviously someone of importance. Would the yacht sail now that he had arrived? These were questions for which he could not find answers. All he could do was wait and watch events until the approach of daylight forced him to retire to a less dangerous position.

The motor launch came on at reduced speed, its wake a sweeping curve of rippling water, to be berthed alongside the yacht. Two men in white suits climbed aboard, to be greeted warmly, even affectionately, by others who stood waiting for them. For a short while they stood together, talking, and the crew that had watched this from a respectful distance, dispersed.

Ginger, a prey to indecision, sat down to think things over, to decide whether to proceed with his original plan or abandon it. He felt he ought to do something. He was prepared to take risks, but could not shut his eyes to the fact that what he had purposed was now more difficult, if not hopeless. Unable to make up his mind, all he could do was stare down at the yacht and the men moving about on deck. He could just see them in the moonlight.

He was still there, still watching, still irresolute, when a slight sound near at hand brought his eyes and ears to the alert. He had not seen anyone come ashore, but someone, or something, was within a few yards of him. Could it be the goats? He ruled them out. After being hunted they were not likely to come near the yacht.

The snapping of a dead twig sent him into a low crouch behind the cactus, certain that someone was near him. His brain raced. Who could it be? Why the stealth? No member of the crew could have any reason to come ashore at that hour; and even allowing for the possibility, why act like a fugitive? Could it be Biggles? No, he decided. Biggles would make for the dinghy as the most likely place to find him.

The prowler came nearer, and Ginger held his breath when he saw a skulking figure within five yards of him. Behind a cactus it stood erect, looking down on the yacht. It was a young man. The moonlight fell full on his face. Preposterous though it seemed, a feeling came over Ginger that he had seen the face before. Where? He stared and stared again. Where could he have seen those finely cut features, the jet black hair and smooth olive skin?

Then memory came to his aid with a rush. He *did* know the man, and remembered the one and only occasion on which he had seen him. It was at Warleigh Towers, Brandt's home in England. It was the lad who had watched Biggles turning over the bonfire ash in the garden. He had cause to remember him for there had been a scuffle. The name came to him. Francisco Tristano. A Cuban. What on earth was he doing here? He was no friend of Brandt. On the contrary he had sworn to kill him in revenge for the murder of his father. He was carrying an instrument which Ginger made out to be a hatchet. For what purpose was it intended?

Thoughts raced through Ginger's head. How had the youth got to the island? And, for that matter, how did he know Brandt was there? How much did he know? Why had he come ashore at that hour or had he been there, in hiding, all along? What was more important, could he be relied on as an ally? Ginger needed one — badly.

He had to make up his mind quickly, for the young Cuban was moving on up the hill towards the camping ground. He decided the chance was worth

taking.

‘Francisco,’ he said softly.

The lad was round in a flash, the hatchet poised to strike.

Ginger stood up and took a pace forward into the moonlight. ‘Remember me?’ he questioned quietly. ‘We met in the garden of Brandt’s house in England.’

If Ginger had been astonished to see Francisco, the young Cuban appeared to be staggered to see Ginger. He lowered the hatchet. With his dark eyes round with wonder he advanced a pace. ‘The English policeman,’ he breathed. ‘What you do here?’

CHAPTER 11

FRANCISCO EXPLAINS

GINGER took a deep breath of relief that his exposure had passed off without any fuss. 'I'm watching Brandt,' he explained. 'I think he's on that yacht.'

'Yes. I think so, too. I hope so.'

'How did you get here?'

'On the boat.'

'Which boat?'

'The one that just comes in.'

'How did you manage that?'

'I come as one of the crew.'

'Why?'

'To kill this one you call Brandt.'

'How did you know he was here?'

'When I went back to Havana I watch his brother Martino.'

'So he was in Cuba.'

'Yes. He lives secretly in the *Palacio de los Rosa*.'

'What sort of place is that?'

'Hotel for rich people. A friend tells me he is there.'

Palacio de los Rosa! The address rang a bell in Ginger's memory. He remembered the slip of paper found in the bonfire ash. 'Sit down and tell me about it,' he suggested.

Francisco complied. 'I watch Martino, hoping one day I will see his brother. He goes to Miami, in Florida, where he does a strange business.'

'What business?'

'He is selling jewels. Where they come from I do not know.'

'I think I can tell you. Brandt bought them in England. Somehow he must have got them to his brother, who sold them to raise funds for the revolution. But go on.'

'Then Martino buys a boat, the small one you see below. Ah, I say. Now he will lead me to his brother.'

'But how did you get here?'

'With Martino, on his boat.'

'How did you manage that?'

'He is looking for men for the boat. I go to him and say I am a Cuban who has run away from the government. I will be a rebel. I want to fight. So he brings me here with some others.'

'Then it is Martino, Brandt's brother, who has just arrived in the launch?'

'Sí, señor.'

'And you still intend to kill Mattio?'

‘I have sworn it. I have a *pistola*.’

‘Aren’t you afraid he may recognize you?’

‘No, *señor*. I am only a small boy when he sees me.’

‘Why have you come ashore?’

‘To find where he puts the guns, to spoil them.’ Francisco handled the hatchet significantly.

‘Then you are not really in favour of a revolution?’

‘No, *señor*.’

‘Well, you are too late to damage the guns. They have already been put on board the yacht.’

Francisco made a typically Latin gesture of annoyance. ‘What matters? I will kill Mattio.’

‘You are more likely to be killed yourself. There are two hundred men on that ship.’

‘What matters as long as I kill the man who kills my father? I will make fire and burn the ship.’

Ginger was shaken, for the lad spoke as if he meant what he said. ‘You can’t do that,’ he said sharply.

‘*Porqué?*’

‘Because my friend, the one you saw me with in England, is at present on the ship.’

Francisco stared. ‘The head policeman?’

‘Yes.’

‘What does he do there?’

‘I don’t know. I think he was captured and is now a prisoner. Otherwise he would have come back to me.’

‘How do you come here?’

‘In an aeroplane. It has gone now but will return.’ Ginger went on to explain how he and Biggles had come ashore in the dinghy, where they had hidden it and what they had planned to do. He concluded by narrating how Brandt had come ashore and how Biggles had been taken to the yacht.

‘So this is why you watch?’

‘Of course.’

‘What you do now?’

Ginger shrugged helplessly. ‘I don’t know. What can I do? I was on my way to the ship when I saw you. I can’t leave my friend.’

‘You must save him quickly or it will be too late.’

‘Why do you say quickly?’

‘Because tomorrow the ships go.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I hear talk.’

‘Where are they going?’

‘To Cuba.’

‘To start a revolution?’

‘But of course.’

‘Why do they do that?’

‘So that Martino can be Presidente of Cuba.’

‘So that’s it.’

‘*Si, señor.*’

‘I take it you don’t want him to be President.’

Francisco spat.

‘As Martino took you on his yacht I imagine he doesn’t know who you are?’

‘He does not know.’

‘Then it’s safe for you to go back on board.’

‘Why not? Now you tell me the guns are on board I shall go back. Why do you ask this?’

‘Because if you are going back on board you might be able to find out what has happened to my friend. They may have killed him. If not, where have they put him? If I knew that I might help him to escape. We could then join forces and see about stopping the revolution.’

‘I must kill Mattio.’

‘That’s your affair. I’m only concerned with getting my friend off Brandt’s yacht.’

Francisco thought for a moment or two. He got up. ‘I will do as you say,’ he decided. ‘I will find where they have put your comrade and come back to you. Wait here.’

‘I won’t move,’ promised Ginger.

Francisco set off down the hill towards the lagoon. Not until he had gone some distance did Ginger notice he had left his hatchet behind on the ground where he had been sitting. It seemed unimportant at the time and he thought nothing more of it.

Instead, he remained seated, his chin in his hands, elbows on his knees, marvelling at the strange workings of Fate, and at the young Cuban’s persistence in his determination to avenge his father’s death. Clearly, he had dedicated himself to this sinister task.

All Ginger could do now was wait. The outlook, to say the least of it, was vague. In fact, the whole business, he felt, was getting in too much of a tangle for him to handle alone.

CHAPTER 12

MURDER

WHEN Biggles walked down to the yacht with Brandt and his confederates he had no clear idea of what he was going to do, or, for that matter, what was behind Brandt's purpose in inviting him on his yacht. All he knew was that up to this moment Brandt had shown no signs of animosity, or given a hint that he suspected him of being anything other than what he had pretended to be — a casual explorer.

With that he was content, if not entirely at ease. He looked at the financier several times on the way down the hill; but his face was expressionless and told him nothing. Of his companions Biggles was not so sure. He didn't like the way they muttered among themselves. Anyway, as to have refused the invitation to go on board might have aroused suspicions if they were not already there, he went, adopting an attitude of good will.

At all events, he thought, he would be able to confirm that the ship was in fact the missing yacht, disguised by minor structural alterations and a new coat of paint. He imagined the name would have been changed, too, and it would be useful to know the new one.

As soon as he stepped on board he knew he was on the *Cordelia*, for it was at once evident that one of the two funnels was a dummy. Aside from that, the new paint, red and black, had been carelessly applied, slapped on as if in haste, in some places showing the white underneath. This was understandable, for, naturally, the work would be done in a hurry.

He followed Brandt down the companion-way steps and along a corridor into what was obviously the main cabin, comfortably if not luxuriously furnished as a sitting-room. The portholes were a little above eye level, so from then on he knew nothing about what was happening outside. Which means he did not see the war stores brought down from the cave and stowed on board. He could hear a good deal of activity. A steady patter of footsteps on the deck above told him that something was going on, but he didn't attempt to guess what it was. He was more concerned with what might happen in the cabin. The big question, why he had been invited on board, was still unanswered.

Brandt produced drinks in the most affable manner. Biggles accepted one, as did the rest of the party, numbering five. He knew none of them, but quite obviously they were in the conspiracy.

Then, suddenly, as they stood with glasses in their hands, without any great dramatic effect Brandt played his first card. Looking Biggles straight in the eyes, without raising his voice and hardly a change of expression, he said: 'Now perhaps you will tell me, with so many delightful islands from which to choose, why you came to this one?'

Biggles, affecting mild surprise, played the old game of answering a question with another. 'Is there any reason why I shouldn't come here?'

Brandt's voice hardened. 'Don't fence. What was your real purpose in coming to Isla Santina?'

'I had a fancy to see it.'

'To see the island, or something you thought you might find here?'

'Is there something here I shouldn't see?'

'There could be. If you have not already seen it.'

'Such as?'

'This yacht, for instance. Don't ask questions. Answer mine.'

Still Biggles procrastinated, really to gain time, for he could see this would serve no other purpose. Apparently he had been suspect from the outset.

'Before we go any further, suppose you tell me the purpose of this interrogation. It won't surprise you if I take exception to it. This is British territory, and I have as much right here as you have — possibly more.'

'Very well,' rejoined Brandt curtly. 'I will tell you why you came here. You came as a spy.'

'Spy! For whom? For what?'

'That is what I want you to tell me, and I'd advise you to be frank. I am a patient man, but I can't say that for all my friends.'

Biggles saw that any further pretence would be futile. The alternative was to take a strong line, one that would give his questioner something to think about.

'Very well,' he said evenly. 'If you're going to talk about advice let me give you some. I know who you are. I know what you're doing, and so do a lot of other people. It's no use, Brandt. You won't get away with it. The British government keeps a closer eye on its property than you may imagine. No great harm has been done so far, but if you go on as you are you'll find yourself in trouble in a big way. Pack it up. Go back to Falmouth and make any excuse you like for what you've done.' Biggles took a cigarette from his case and lit it with casual unconcern.

Brandt now looked shaken. 'Pack what up?'

'I don't have to tell you.'

Brandt's face lost some of its colour. 'Who are you and what are you?' he blurted.

Biggles considered the question for a few seconds. 'I think for your own good you had better know,' he decided. 'My name, which is unimportant and will probably mean nothing to you, is Bigglesworth. I am a Scotland Yard detective seconded to the International Police Bureau.'

There was another brittle silence. Then Brandt sneered: 'You seem to have been very busy detecting.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'That's my job.'

'How much do you know?'

'As much as is necessary.'

‘And what do you intend to do about it?’

‘That depends on what you do.’

‘Aren’t you afraid to tell me this?’

‘Afraid? Of what?’

‘Of what we might do to you.’

‘Whatever you do to me will make no difference to the ultimate result. The authorities I represent know you are here. They also know I am here. To me was assigned the task of finding the *Cordelia* and I have done that. In that you have no cause to complain, for the investigation was as much in your own interest as ours. We don’t like mysterious disappearances. You should know that. After all, you are a rich man. You might have been murdered, or abducted. The best thing you can do is sail back to England and explain your behaviour. We are reasonable people.’

Brandt stared stonily. He may have been impressed, for he had much to lose. Not so his companions. The English some of them spoke may not have been fluent, but they had obviously been able to follow the conversation, for they were now looking venomous. One, who carried a revolver on his belt, fingered it suggestively, and Biggles perceived that the situation had reached a critical stage. But there was nothing he could do except await the outcome.

‘Take him with us,’ snapped a swarthy individual.

‘What good will that do you?’ inquired Biggles, blandly.

‘If there is fighting you will be the first to fall. I will see to that.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘You may derive some satisfaction from shooting me, but that won’t help much when you yourself are facing a firing squad for inducing a lot of poor fools to throw away their lives merely to satisfy your ambition. That’s how this business will end.’

‘We shall win.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘Okay, if that’s how you feel. It’s all the same to me. You’ve been warned. The authorities know what you intend to do so I’d say you’ve lost before you start.’

‘How did you learn about this?’ asked Brandt, who was looking worried.

‘We needn’t go into that. You left a trail that wasn’t very hard to follow.’

Apparently Brandt, who after all was a reasonably balanced man, decided the matter needed thought. He went to the door, opened it and called. Two stalwart negroes, who had evidently been on guard, came in. He spoke to them in rapid Spanish. They seized Biggles by the arms.

Said Brandt: ‘Try no tricks. Already my friends are in favour of putting you where you can do no mischief.’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘Don’t fool yourself, Brandt. The mischief is already done.’

He was taken out, marched along a corridor and thrust into an empty cabin. He heard the key turn in the lock.

Automatically he inspected his place of confinement. It was small, with one porthole and a single bunk, evidently accommodation for a guest. A

glance showed there was no question of escape through the porthole. It was too small. In the absence of a chair he sat on the bunk to think things over, glad they hadn't taken his cigarette case. In fact, they hadn't taken anything, in the heat of the moment not having bothered to search him.

The situation, he reflected with a wry smile, was a curious one. His orders had been to find the *Cordelia*. Just that and nothing more. The task had looked a formidable one, yet oddly enough it had proved to be comparatively easy. There had been no instructions about arresting Brandt should he find him. Indeed, as far as he knew no warrant had been taken out against him. Nothing criminal had been proved; probably nothing a good lawyer would not be able to explain should the financier decide to return to England. Wherefore, strictly speaking, Biggles had finished his mission, and all that remained for him to do was make his report to the Air Commodore who would then take instructions from a higher authority. At the moment, of course, there was no question of that.

Naturally, his thoughts turned to Ginger, who, from his position on the hillside, must have seen what had happened. On the face of it there appeared nothing he could do, either, except await the arrival of the plane, when he would be able to tell Algy and Bertie what had transpired on the island. Thereafter they would have to act on their own initiative.

As for Brandt, two courses were open to him. He could either abandon the revolutionary enterprise in view of what he had just been told, or, ignoring Biggles's advice, proceed with it. Thinking the matter over, Biggles saw the choice might not be left to him. His Cuban associates, having gone so far, might have something to say about that. Taking all the circumstances into consideration, Biggles thought the conspirators would go forward with their plan, taking him with them. In that case, should the revolution fail, he would be assumed to be one of the rebels and shot out of hand, in the manner of such revolutions, before he could prove his identity.

The day wore on. No one came near him. The light began to fail as the sun went down. There seemed to be a good deal of activity on the deck above him. By standing on the bunk he could look through the porthole, but all he could see was a small section of the rocky shore. There was nothing of interest to him.

His great fear was that the yacht might sail at any moment. Once at sea he would be utterly helpless. Should the yacht be intercepted by a gunboat and sunk, as might well happen if the Cuban authorities had got wind of what was afoot, he would go down with it.

Night closed in.

He was still standing on the bunk gazing through the porthole when a face suddenly appeared on the other side of the heavy glass within a few inches of his own. It had gone in an instant, but not before the thought struck him he had seen it before. Where? In what circumstances? It took him a minute or two, searching his memory, to find the answer. It was a face he had seen only

once before in his life, and that was in England, in the garden of Brandt's home in Hertfordshire. The young Cuban who had gone there bent on murder. Francisco something or other.

To say that Biggles was astonished would be to put it mildly. What on earth was the youth doing here? He thought, from the expression on the lad's face, that he had recognized him. Certainly he had not looked surprised to see him. He knew him to be a police officer. What effect would that have on the situation?

Biggles was completely baffled, which was not surprising. According to the young Cuban's own statement he was the sworn enemy of the man who had murdered his father. What, then, was he doing on Brandt's yacht? It seemed most unlikely that he could have got to the island any other way.

Biggles sat on the bunk and lit a cigarette to wrestle with the problem.

A few minutes later there came a curious sound from outside the door. A grunt was followed by a thump, as if a heavy object had fallen. A key rattled. The door was pushed open and Francisco stood on the threshold, pistol in hand. The light from the corridor fell on his face. His expression was tense.

'Come quickly, *señor*,' he said.

No explanation was offered. Not that one was needed, for on the floor in a crumpled heap lay the man who had evidently been on guard outside the door.

Francisco did not tarry. With an urgent signal he strode away up the corridor. Biggles followed. From behind the door of the main cabin came sounds of a furious altercation and Biggles could imagine what it was about. Francisco went straight on, up the companion steps, with Biggles on his heels.

On the deck men were lying about, some sleeping, some smoking. They did not move. Francisco pointed up the hill with his pistol. 'Go, *señor*,' he said. 'Your friend waits for you.'

'Aren't you coming?' asked Biggles, surprised.

'No. I have something else to do.'

Biggles would have asked some questions, but he realized this was not the time or place. Francisco had given him an opportunity to get away and he was more than willing to take it.

He had gone two or three paces forward when a man who had been leaning on the rail, with his back towards them, turned as if he had heard the talking. He was smoking a cigar. It was Brandt. Seeing Biggles he snatched the cigar from his mouth, uttered a low exclamation of surprise, and started to move; but he stopped when Francisco covered him with his pistol.

'Dog! So at last we meet,' grated Francisco.

'I don't know you,' answered Brandt.

Then I remind you. I am Francisco Tristano. You murdered—'

'Don't do it,' rapped out Biggles, seeing what was coming.

'Let him die.'

'Stop—'

The rest of what Biggles intended to say was lost in the report of the pistol.

Brandt started convulsively, clutching at his stomach. The cigar fell from his hand. His legs collapsed under him and he sank down.

‘You young fool,’ snapped Biggles, furiously. ‘Run for it.’

Without waiting to see if Francisco was with him he sprang ashore and dashed on up the hill. Nor did he stop until he had covered some distance, and only then because he heard shots behind him. He looked round, but in the darkness could not see Francisco. From the yacht came cries and other sounds of confusion.

‘Francisco!’ called Biggles sharply.

There was no answer.

For a few seconds Biggles hesitated, uncertain what to do. Naturally, he didn’t like the idea of abandoning the lad who had helped him, even though he had ruined everything at the last moment. Had he stayed on the ship? Had he been shot down or seized by the men on the deck? Had he got away and gone into hiding on the island? There was no answer to these questions, and Biggles saw there was really nothing he could do — at all events, for the time being. The whole thing had happened so quickly there had been little time to think, much less ask Francisco what he intended to do.

Biggles went on up the hill, making for the spot where he had left Ginger, confident that if he had not returned to the dinghy he would still be there. From the fact that Francisco had said ‘your friend waits for you’, he could only assume that the two had met, although how that had come about he could not imagine.

He was not a little relieved when Ginger answered his first low whistle, for he expected to have some trouble in finding him. In the dark it would be difficult to find the exact spot where he had left him, should he still be there. However, contact having been made, he went on and presently joined him.

So, for that matter, after the shooting, was Ginger relieved to see Biggles. Peering into the darkness his first words were: ‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes. Did you expect someone to be with me?’

‘Yes. That Cuban lad we met at Warleigh Towers. He’s here. Have you seen him?’

‘I have.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He went to find you. He told me to wait here, saying he’d come back.’

‘He found me all right, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. I gather you had a word with him.’

‘Yes. We met by accident. I told him you were on the yacht, probably a prisoner.’

‘I was locked in a spare cabin. He got me out by coshing the guard posted to watch I didn’t get away.’

‘He came here to shoot Brandt.’

‘He’s done it.’

Ginger stared. 'You mean — he's actually — shot Brandt?'

'That's what I said. That's what started the shooting.'

'What a shocker!'

'I couldn't stop him. You can bet I didn't want any shooting at that moment.'

'How did it happen?'

'It was Brandt's bad luck to be standing on deck just as we were leaving. It was the chance Francisco had been waiting for — for years. Brandt hadn't a hope. Francisco didn't argue. Having told Brandt who he was he pulled a gun and let him have it.'

'He must have been crazy.'

'Where Brandt was concerned, he was. After the shot I made a bolt for it, feeling certain he'd follow me. He may have done. I didn't waste time looking back. I lost sight of him in the dark and haven't seen him since. There was some more shooting and he may have been involved in it. I don't know. Being in a hurry to find you I kept going. Is this where you met?'

'Yes. He told me to wait here.'

'Then we'd better give him a few minutes to see if he shows up. If he doesn't we'll make for the dinghy. As things are it would be a waste of time to look for him. As soon as it gets light the island will be swarming with men looking for us. How did Francisco get here?'

'He came on the launch.'

'Launch? What launch? I didn't see one.'

'It arrived after you'd gone below. It brought Brandt's brother to join the party. That may have been what the yacht was waiting for. Francisco, pretending to be a rebel, got a job on the launch as one of the crew. That's what he told me. He admitted he was after Brandt.'

'It was an obsession with him. Why did he come ashore, anyway?'

'He had some wild idea of smashing the war stores that had been dumped here. He didn't know they'd been taken on board the yacht. That was something I was able to tell him. By-the-way, the *Cordelia* leaves tomorrow — zero hour for the revolution to start.'

'How do you know that?'

'Francisco told me.'

'He seems to have told you plenty.'

'Enough to get me really worried, knowing you were on the yacht.'

They waited for some time. Francisco did not come. Biggles told Ginger about the cave and all that had happened to him. During this period the yacht was buzzing like an overturned beehive.

'He isn't coming,' decided Biggles at last. 'Let's go.'

They set off for the dinghy.

'What's that you're carrying?' asked Biggles.

'A hatchet.'

'Where did that come from?'

‘Francisco brought it ashore with him.’

‘Why?’

‘To knock some dents in Brandt’s guns, as I told you. He left it behind when he went back to the yacht to look for you.’

‘What are you going to do with it?’

‘Sitting here waiting with nothing to do I got an idea.’

‘For what?’

‘Keeping the *Cordelia* in the lagoon while you were on board — long enough for her to miss the tide, anyway. Matter of fact I was just about to move off to do it when the shooting started.’

‘How did you reckon to keep the *Cordelia* bottled up with a hatchet?’ Biggles, pardonably, looked a trifle sceptical.

‘If those palms at the entrance to the lagoon were cut down so that they fell across the gap, blocking it, neither of the boats would be able to get out until they were hauled clear, and that would take time.’

‘Great work! That was an idea,’ complimented Biggles. ‘Real brainwave. We’ll think more about it. Anything could happen now. I mean, the fact of Brandt being shot is almost certain to affect the plans of the racketeers left on the *Cordelia*. Brandt, as owner of the yacht and financier of the scheme, may have been the leader, in which case they’ll have to choose a new one.’

‘Brandt’s brother, probably.’

‘Could be.’

They went on some way towards the ridge silhouetted above them, making slow progress in the tricky light through the thorny cactus.

‘We can take it easy,’ said Biggles, pulling up. ‘There’s no desperate hurry now. We shall hear the machine coming, and as long as we’re at the rendezvous by the time it gets here we should be all right.’

CHAPTER 13

MORE PROBLEMS

BIGGLES and Ginger found seats on the ground facing the lagoon, which, of course, also gave a view of the two vessels, or as much as could be seen of them through the gloom. Sounds rather than sights indicated considerable activity. The moon gave a fair amount of light, but it lacked its usual brilliant lustre, and Biggles repeated his suspicions that the weather was not to be trusted.

Ginger took the opportunity to explain in more detail all that Francisco had told him. 'To shoot Brandt as he did, in cold blood, was a shocking thing to do,' he concluded in a pained voice.

'I would not say entirely in cold blood,' returned Biggles. 'He was all steamed up. Besides, as a Latin, he's not to be judged by our standards. You might feel differently had your father been murdered.'

'Was Brandt actually killed?'

'I don't know. I didn't wait to see. I think the bullet struck him in the stomach, so if he wasn't killed outright he won't last long without expert surgical attention. There is this about it. He's out of the revolution. There's no doubt about that. What I'm anxious to do now is let the Air Commodore know what's cooking before the *Cordelia* can do any serious mischief.'

'How about my scheme for bottling up the lagoon to keep her here? It shouldn't be too difficult. They're not likely to start looking for us in the dark, and the narrow ground by the gap is the last place they'd expect to find us.'

Biggles considered the proposition, looking at the knoll on which the palms grew. It was on their own side of the entrance so there would be no great distance to go in order to reach it. 'As there's nothing we can do until the machine comes in the morning I think we might try it,' he decided. 'If we can put a cork in the bottle, so to speak, while they're inside, it would at least delay the revolution for a little while. No doubt, with all the hands they have available, they'd be able to haul the trees out of the way but that would take some time. I don't think the palms would reach right across the gap but they should make it too narrow for the yacht to get through, even if the launch was able to manage it. Let's go down and have a look.'

The going turned out to be difficult, particularly towards the end where the ground narrowed, for being at the mercy of heavy seas in times of storm, it was all rock, mostly big boulders often covered with slippery seaweed. However, after half-an-hour's rather dangerous work they reached the objective.

'We musn't be too long about this,' said Biggles, looking towards the yacht. 'It'd be a bad place to be trapped if we were spotted.'

'At a pinch we could swim across the gap to the other side. It isn't far.'

‘As I said once before I’d be sorry to try it. With the tide running out we might be carried out to sea, and these waters are notorious for sharks. Well, let’s have a bash at it. You keep an eye on the yacht.’

‘They’re making plenty of noise so I don’t think they’ll hear us.’

Biggles took the hatchet and set to work on the palm that leaned farthest over the water. After five minutes chopping, for the coconut palm is not a hard wood, the tree, borne down by its own weight, fell with a splash, its crown of fronds reaching nearly to the far side of the gap.

‘Jolly good,’ said Ginger.

‘One or two more and we’ll have a bridge to the far side, should we need one,’ observed Biggles with satisfaction. ‘Have a go.’

They waited for a minute, staring in the direction of the yacht for signs that might indicate the fall of the tree had been noticed. When there were none, Ginger started on the second tree.

And so they went on until four palms lay across each other almost closing the gap. By this time the stars were paling in the sky and the dawn breeze was ruffling the water.

‘That’ll do,’ said Biggles. ‘I’d like to see their faces when they discover what’s happened.’

‘That won’t be long,’ returned Ginger. ‘Here’s the launch coming now.’

‘Let’s go.’

They began the return journey to the wider ground, stopping once to watch the launch which, after exploring the barrier, apparently trying to find a way through, turned about and returned at high speed to the yacht. They went on again, making in the direction of the dinghy, but on reaching the ridge above it Biggles stopped again. ‘No hurry,’ he said. ‘We shall hear the machine coming. Let’s watch what happens on the lagoon.’

‘The wind seems to be freshening.’

‘So I notice. I hope it doesn’t get any worse or Algy may jib at landing. It wouldn’t take long to blow up a choppy sea.’

Dawn broke, not with the usual sky of eggshell blue, but grey. Still they sat, watching the island come to life, knowing they could get down to the dinghy in a few minutes when the time came. They could not actually see it because of the slight overhang of the rock face at the bottom of the cliff.

‘I can hear someone calling,’ said Ginger presently.

‘I heard it.’

Again came the shout, nearer.

‘Am I going crazy or is someone calling your name?’ queried Ginger, looking incredulous, as they both crouched behind a clump of cactus.

‘It sounded like it.’

‘What’s the idea? Can they be so daft as to imagine you’ll give yourself up?’

‘Search me.’

Yet again came the call, now quite close. It was a single word, and there

was no longer any doubt about it. It was 'Bigglesworth.'

'What sort of a trap is this?' sneered Ginger.

A man appeared on a small area of open sand just below them. He was alone. He was breathing heavily from exertion. His clothes were dishevelled. Cupping his hands round his mouth he yelled: 'Bigglesworth! Where are you?'

'He's one of the men I saw with Brandt on the yacht,' Biggles told Ginger. Raising his voice he called: 'What do you want?' He did not show himself.

'I want your help. My brother has been shot.'

'People who start wars must expect to be shot. What do you think I can do about it?' returned Biggles, now understanding.

'Take him to hospital in your plane or he will die. Get him to Havana, Nassau, Jamaica, anywhere.'

'So that's it,' breathed Biggles. He called: 'I have no plane. Why not take him in your launch?'

'We've tried that. It can't get out. Some trees are down across the opening.'

'Then haul them out of the way.'

'The trip would be dangerous for a small craft like the launch.'

'It managed to get here.'

'There's a hurricane warning. We just got it over the radio.'

Biggles grimaced, showing Ginger what he thought of this news. He answered: 'Sorry, but I can't help you. You started this. Get on with your revolution.'

'I've finished with it.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Yes. I only want to save my brother.'

Biggles hesitated for a moment. 'All right,' he called. 'You'll see the plane when it comes. Promise me a safe conduct and I'll fly your brother to Nassau.'

'Thank you. I will watch for the plane.'

Ginger looked at Biggles inquiringly. 'Aren't you taking a bit of a chance, trusting him?'

'What else could I do? Brandt was shot. We know that. Apparently he wasn't killed. This brother of his will be too concerned for him to play any tricks. His only chance of getting him into hospital is our aircraft. I don't suppose there's a pilot among them so the plane is no use to them without us.'

Ginger said no more. There he supposed the matter would end for the time being. But at this juncture a new factor arose with the appearance on the scene of three men who had obviously been hurrying. All carried revolvers. Brandt's brother, who had started to walk down the hill, stopped when he saw them.

'What are you trying to do — sell us out?' demanded one of the newcomers, a dark-skinned man, angrily.

'No.'

‘You’re a liar. You’ve been making a deal with that damned English spy.’

‘I’m only trying to save Mattio.’

‘What about us?’

‘You can go on without me.’

‘So that’s the game. Trying to save your own yellow skin.’

‘No.’

‘You dirty double-crosser. You can go to hell with your brother.’ The speaker’s gun blazed.

Brandt’s brother swayed for a moment and then crumpled to the ground.

Biggles did not move, except to make a signal to Ginger to keep still. Standing behind the cactus so far they had not been seen.

Another man joined the three and a passionate conversation ensued. No notice was taken of the man on the ground. Their attention seemed to be on the higher ground as if an advance was contemplated. They appeared to have difficulty in making up their minds.

Biggles made them up for them. Taking out his automatic he fired a shot. It kicked up the sand at their feet.

They waited for no more, but bolted down the hill to disappear from sight behind a mass of prickly pear, from where they could be heard calling for assistance.

Biggles walked quickly down the hill to the fallen man. For a moment he stooped over him. Then, straightening his back, he said quietly: ‘There’s nothing we can do for him. He’s dead.’

‘What a lot of stinkers—’ began Ginger.

‘Forget it,’ said Biggles, shortly. ‘Let’s go down to the dinghy. In a few minutes the whole mob will be looking for us.’

Nothing more was said. Keeping as much cover as possible between them and the lower ground, they crossed the ridge and hastened down the slope to the spot where the dinghy had been tied up.

Reaching it, Biggles looked at the water. He looked up and down. ‘Have we come to the right place?’

Ginger, too, was staring, for the dinghy was not there. ‘This is it.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Certain.’

‘Then what the deuce has happened? Could the dinghy have come adrift?’

‘Impossible!’

Biggles raised his eyes to scan the sea. His arm went up, a finger pointing. ‘Look!’

A quarter of a mile out a small dark object was bobbing on the agitated water. In it could be seen the head and shoulders of a man who was handling a paddle.

‘Francisco!’ exclaimed Ginger.

‘Who else?’

‘Why, that cheap little twister. He’s pinched our boat.’

‘He’s pinched more than that.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘The only water we had was in that dinghy. There’s none on the island.

Well, now we know what happened to him. Having done what he came to do he must have decided to push off on his own. ‘What I don’t understand is how he knew the dinghy was here.’

‘I told him.’

‘You told him? Why?’

‘I mentioned how we got ashore.’

‘Pity.’

‘There seemed no reason why he shouldn’t know.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘He was obviously on our side. Anyway, it never occurred to me that he’d have any use for the dinghy.’

‘You were talking to him before he shot Brandt. After that it was a different matter. Knowing they’d be after him, his one concern would be to get away from the island. There was only one way and he took it.’

‘It was a dirty trick, and I’ll tell him so if ever I catch up with him,’ growled Ginger.

‘Maybe he reckoned the aircraft would pick us up. He couldn’t have known about the hurricane or he wouldn’t have been such a fool as to put to sea in a craft that couldn’t last five minutes in a gale of wind. He’ll be lucky to get away with it. Talking of the hurricane warning, I imagine that’s why the aircraft hasn’t shown up. Algy, in Nassau, would hear about the warning, and knowing what these Caribbean hurricanes can be like, he’d put the machine in the safest place he could find.’¹

‘Well, what do we do about it?’ asked Ginger, sombrely.

‘There isn’t much we can do. It looks as though we might be stuck here for days, in which case our big problem would be water. There’s just a chance some may have been left in the cave. The men who were here when we came must have been left a supply.’

‘The machine might be able to get down on the lagoon,’ suggested Ginger.

‘And be blown against the rocks and smashed to matchwood? Not a hope. In any case, Algy wouldn’t be likely to put the machine down on the lagoon if the yacht was still there.’

‘So what do we do — stay here?’

‘It’d be a bad place to be cornered if that mob of rebels came gunning for us, as no doubt they will. They’re all armed, remember. I think we’d be better off on the high ground, which also happens to be the widest part of the island. There’s more cover there, and we’d have more freedom of movement. It looks as if we made a mistake bottling up the *Cordelia*, which otherwise might have pushed off. I’d feel happier with her out of the way. Let’s move. We can always come back should the machine show up. Not that there’s much chance of that while a hurricane’s in the offing. It could do nothing if it came.’

They made their way back up the slope and from the ridge surveyed the scene below, which of course included the lagoon.

Ginger was more than somewhat relieved when he looked down, for as far as he could make out no attempt was being made to find them, everyone being otherwise engaged in an operation which might have been expected. The clearance of the exit to the open sea. Crowds of men were on the knoll where the trees had been felled. Both vessels were at the gap, the launch hard against the obstruction doing something with a rope. The *Cordelia*, her deck also swarming with men, was lying a little way off. A few men armed with rifles were searching the vegetation, in a desultory manner, near the spot where the vessels had been moored.

Biggles and Ginger, taking care not to show themselves, made their way to the high ground, and finding a convenient spot sat down to watch.

‘They don’t like the idea of being penned in, and I can well understand that,’ remarked Biggles.

The launch, having secured a cable to one of the palms, passed the other end back to the *Cordelia*, which started to go astern, dragging the tree with it. Had the water been dead calm the job would have been simple, but it was getting turbulent, and regardless of shouts of warning and advice, the rope broke, whereupon the palm drifted back to its original position.

‘They won’t catch the tide even if the yacht is prepared to take the chance of facing the hurricane,’ said Biggles.

The work proceeded, and was eventually finished, the trees being dragged back and anchored to the shore to prevent them from drifting back into the gap. All this took some time; in fact, until the late afternoon, when the two vessels returned to their original berths.

‘So they’re not going out tonight,’ said Ginger. ‘I imagine they’re not too keen on facing the storm.’

Biggles looked at the sky. He looked at the sea. ‘It’s no worse. I have an idea we’ve only caught the fringe of it. Had we been in the path of the centre of the hurricane we’d have known all about it. If I’m right we can expect the wind to ease off around sunset.’

After that Biggles sat silent for so long, gazing mostly at the gap in the reef, that Ginger asked him what he was thinking about.

‘I’m trying to decide what these people are most likely to do,’ replied Biggles. ‘If the wind drops they may pull out on the next high tide, which should be around midnight. If they don’t go, as soon as it’s daylight they’ll start combing the island for us. They must know we’re still here.’

‘Why should they? How would that help them?’

‘We’re the only witnesses of everything that’s happened here, so we may suppose they’d be more comfortable in their minds if we could be put out of the way. With an army of men available for a search they’d be bound to get us sooner or later.’

‘What about Francisco, should he manage to reach land? He knows all

about it.'

'With a murder on his hands he's not likely to talk. His interest in the business was purely personal.'

'Is there anything we can do?'

'Possibly. Now they've managed to clear the exit they must feel confident they can slip out any time it suits them.'

'Well?'

'If I thought they'd go I wouldn't try to stop them. That would suit us. If they intend staying another day to winkle us out I'd find them another job to keep them occupied.'

'How?'

'They've lashed those trees clear of the gap, but as far as I can make out, being amateurs at this sort of thing, they've left no one to guard. If the ropes were cut, with the tide running out the trees would again be carried to the opening and perhaps stick there. In that case they'd have to repeat the performance of hauling them away. That would prevent them from looking for us, or at any rate delay them long enough for the machine to come and get us out of this jam.'

'Let's do that.'

'All right. We'll wait till it gets really dark.'

An hour later they got up and began a cautious advance down the hill towards the knoll.

¹ Hurricane. From the native word *hurican*, which means literally 'evil spirit'. Those that sweep up the eastern seaboard of Central America and through the West Indies are notorious for the damage they do.

CHAPTER 14

HARD PRESSED

KNOWING what the ground was like, having been over it, less difficulty was experienced in getting to the place, just inside the lagoon, where the trunks of the palms had been anchored to the rocks.

As Biggles had anticipated, no guard had been left there, as a cautious reconnaissance revealed. It was found that the trees had been lashed together and moored at both ends.

‘This should be easy,’ observed Biggles. ‘Had the gang been a bit brighter in the uptake they’d have hauled them farther away. As they are, it’s a slice of cake.’

The rope that held the inside end was the first cut, whereupon at a push the whole thing began to swing out, as if on a hinge, to lie broadside to the opening. When, presently, the other rope was cut, the mass began to drift on the tide, still running out, into the desired position. As Ginger remarked, with the trees still lashed together about the middle, they made a more substantial boom than they had on the previous occasion.

‘That’s fine,’ said Biggles. ‘Let’s get back.’

Returning to the higher ground they made their way back to their old position, above the place where the dinghy had been moored but on the lagoon side of the ridge, and finding a patch of ground not occupied by vegetation, lay down to rest.

‘You might as well try to snatch a spot of shut-eye,’ Biggles advised Ginger.

‘What about you?’

‘I can manage with the odd doze. I’d rather keep an eye on things. I’ll wake you if there’s anything to look at.’

‘Is it my imagination or is the wind easing off a bit?’

‘I think you’re right. The gusts aren’t as strong as they were. I hope that means we’re out of the direct path of the storm. With any luck we might get away tomorrow.’

Ginger closed his eyes. He needed no rocking to put him to sleep.

There was one minor alarm during the night, but it turned out to be some goats grazing towards them.

Biggles was sitting up when Ginger opened his eyes to see the first rays of dawn painting the sky its habitual cerulean blue. The wind had dropped to a gentle breeze and the sea had responded by moderating, showing only a few ‘catspaws’ far out.

‘So the hurricane did miss us,’ he said, sitting up.

‘We were either on the fringe or just caught the tail end of it. Francisco may have been lucky after all. There are plenty of islands not too far away.’

There was always a chance that he might be picked up by a local craft, a sponger or a fishing boat, making for port.'

Ginger was no longer interested in Francisco, and said so. 'I could do with a gallon of tea, a wash and a brush up,' he added.

'You can forget the luxuries until the machine comes,' returned Biggles. 'I'm out of cigarettes. My own fault. I should have made allowances for being stuck here; but as you've heard me say before, it's always easy to be wise afterwards.'

'What's happening down below? Have they started looking for us?'

'Not yet. They're too busy. They've discovered the trees are back in the gap. I bet it shook them when they found they were still in the trap. Take a look.'

Ginger moved his position a little to get a better view and saw both the yacht and the launch near the gap, with a small army of men working feverishly to clear the exit. He also noticed some men, who had evidently just come ashore, forming a line across the narrow part of the reef. They all carried rifles.

'They're starting to look for us,' he announced.

'Not necessarily.'

'What else could they be doing?'

'They may be after some goats. With that number of men to feed they must be getting short of rations. Their schedule has come unstuck. Like us, they couldn't have reckoned on being here as long as this.'

'Hark! Can you hear something?'

From a long way off came the unmistakable drone of aero engines.

'Good,' said Biggles. 'Here comes the machine. You should soon be having your dish of tea.'

'Thank goodness for that. Desert islands may be fun in books but they soon get pretty boring.'

'We'd better start moving towards the rendezvous, the place where we left the dinghy. That's where Algy will try first.'

They got up and set off on their short journey.

Near the ridge, shading his eyes from the glare of the rising sun, Biggles stopped to locate a small dark speck, high in the sky, that was heading directly towards the island. He stared, and continued to stare, an extraordinary expression on his face.

'What is it?' asked Ginger anxiously. 'Is something wrong?'

'Plenty.'

'What?'

'That isn't our machine.'

'Not the *Gadfly*?' Ginger blinked, and studied the aircraft for the first time.

'Great grief!' he exclaimed. 'You're right. What other machine could it be? We're right off the track of any regular service.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Don't ask me.'

‘Well, would you believe that?’

‘I’d believe anything.’

The aircraft came on, now losing height.

Ginger turned and looked down at the lagoon to see if the rebels had noticed it. They had. All work had stopped. Men were staring up, some pointing. He turned back to Biggles. ‘The *Gadfly* may have been damaged and Algy has managed to get another machine,’ he suggested.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘The machine’s coming from the wrong direction. Algy wouldn’t go out of his way.’

The aircraft, a twin-engined job of American design, roared over, and began a circuit of the lagoon. When it banked, showing the underside of its wings, Ginger understood. It carried military markings, also on tail and fuselage. They were red and blue with a white star.

‘Cuban Air Corps,’ said Biggles, pithily. ‘That should throw the hammer in the gears.’

It did. Men on the yacht began jumping overboard. In fact, there was a general rush to get on shore.

‘They’re scared it may be going to lay some eggs on ‘em,’ said Biggles.

This did not happen, however. The machine circled twice and then raced off in the direction from which it had come.

‘What do you make of that?’ queried Ginger.

‘A Cuban Air Corps spotter come over for a dekkko. I’d say the radio operator is already telling his headquarters what he’s seen here.’

‘You think the machine was sent here?’

‘It’s unlikely it came here by accident. It’s far more likely that Algy, getting worried about us, has spilt the beans. No matter how, but it looks to me as if the Cuban government has got wind of what’s going on here and sent that machine out to check up.’

‘How’s that going to affect us?’

‘It could be nasty unless Algy arrives pretty soon and picks us up. The revolution has fizzled out, and everyone on board the *Cordelia* must know that now. They’ll blame us for that, so we can expect short shrift if they catch us. I have a feeling that this island is going to be a warm spot presently. The people down below obviously think that, too. They’re in a real flap, and I’m not surprised at that. It’ll be a firing squad for any that are caught.’

Flap was the word. Both vessels, or rather, the people on them, were working at feverish speed to clear the passage to the open sea. From the shouting it was clear that the appearance of the Cuban aircraft had caused a panic. Some of the motley crowd on the *Cordelia*, apparently preferring to take their chance ashore, were slipping away to find refuge on dry land.

‘What if the *Cordelia* gets out?’ asked Ginger.

‘She hasn’t a hope. She’ll be tracked wherever she goes.’

‘And what if she doesn’t get out?’

‘That mob has a good idea of what’s likely to happen next,’ said Biggles grimly.

‘What do you think will happen?’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me if the Cuban government sent over a formation of bombers. You can bet your life they’ll act promptly to nip this rebellion in the bud.’

Ginger looked alarmed. ‘If they start plastering the place with bombs it’s going to be no joke.’

‘You’re telling me! From now on it’s going to be no joke anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It looks to me as if those fellows who have come ashore are joining those who were already looking for us. If they spot us we’ve had it. On a scrap of land this size, with so many of ‘em, it’s going to be difficult to prevent that. Our best chance is to get to the place where we left the dinghy. That’s the first place Algy will look for us. Let’s get to the ridge for a start.’

‘What the devil can Algy be doing? What’s he waiting for? With the hurricane away he should have been here long before this.’

‘If we’re lucky we shall know the answer to that in due course.’

Biggles, bent nearly double and moving swiftly from cover to cover, led the way to the rocky skyline that marked the ridge beyond which the ground sloped steeply to the rendezvous. They had nearly reached it when a yell to their left turned their heads in that direction. It was one of the rebels, more agile than the rest, since he was some distance in front of the main line. He was waving his arms and pointing, not towards Biggles but to some object beyond the far side of the lagoon. Ginger could not see what it was, rocks intervening. The man started running down the hill.

‘What’s bitten him?’ muttered Biggles.

‘Could he have seen us?’

‘I don’t think so. But he could certainly see something to get him excited.’

What this was soon announced its presence. The boom of a heavy gun sent the seagulls aloft, wheeling and screaming. A little cloud of smoke showed above the far side of the island. Some men who had remained on the yacht jumped overboard and made for the shore.

Ginger could only think of a bomb. He looked up but could see no aircraft. ‘What goes on?’

‘Never mind that, keep going,’ snapped Biggles, running on towards the ridge.

Presently, looking back, they saw the cause of the commotion. A grey-painted vessel had rounded the far side of the island and was approaching the entrance to the lagoon. A flag strange to Ginger fluttered from the mast. As he stared at it a gun flashed. A shell screamed. Like Biggles, he went flat. The shell burst well below them, sending up a cloud of dust and pieces of rock. A herd of goats near the spot scattered in wild stampede.

‘Well, what do you know?’ said Biggles. ‘Now we have the Cuban navy on the job. This little island is going to be in the news.’

‘What are they shooting at? Why don’t they shoot at the yacht?’

‘Maybe that’s what they are shooting at, but are a bit out of practice. Keep going.’

‘Where the deuce is Algy?’

‘It’s no use asking me.’

Again they hurried forward, only to stop, crouching, behind a clump of prickly pear, when some rebels appeared in front of them, not far away. This was by mere chance, for it was obvious from their frenzied behaviour that their main object was to get as far away as possible from the gunboat. This was going on all over the island, now swarming with insurgents looking for cover, or more likely somewhere to hide.

‘This is certainly the pay-off as far as the revolution is concerned,’ said Biggles, mopping sweat from his face, for the sun was now well up and the heat was grilling. ‘It’s likely to be the pay-off for us too, if we’re caught,’ he added, grimly.

‘But it was us who busted the revolution,’ declared Ginger indignantly.

‘That may be, but they’re not to know that. They’ll take us for rebels and they won’t stop to ask questions. Do we look like respectable police officers?’

Looking at Biggles, Ginger found the answer. Unshaven, his hair matted with sweat, dirty, his clothes torn, he looked as might have been expected after what they had been doing. He realized he must be in much the same state, so they might well be taken for members of the rebel army.

They waited in the deep shade of the prickly pear, hoping the panic-stricken rebels would pass without seeing them. For a minute or two it looked as if this might happen; but at the last moment one of them, a negro they had not previously seen, and who was walking a little apart from the others, appeared suddenly from the far side of the cactus behind which they were standing. He saw them at once, and letting out a yell brought to his shoulder the rifle he carried.

There was no time for argument. Biggles, prepared for such an eventuality, already had his automatic in his hand. The range was almost point blank. He fired. The man dropped his rifle, and falling, rolled slowly down the slope until he was stopped by a rock.

But the mischief had been done, and his companions lower down changed their direction.

‘Looks as if we shall have to fight it out,’ said Biggles tersely. ‘If we can get to the ridge we may be able to hold ‘em. Come on.’

They raced for the ridge.

Shots and shouts behind told them they had been seen by the men who, no doubt holding them responsible for the failure of their enterprise, would welcome the opportunity to get even.

The retreat up the hill soon developed into a brisk rearguard action with

bullets smacking against rock or ripping through the juicy cactus. Most of this shooting came from the enemy. Biggles and Ginger, having little reserve of ammunition, held what they had for a last stand. Fortunately the rebels were poor shots, although this was to be expected of men unaccustomed to carrying firearms.

Twice Biggles halted behind a convenient rock to fire a single shot, to force the enemy to take cover, before crossing a strip of open ground. On these occasions Ginger's eyes swept the sky, hoping to see the aircraft which alone could save them; but in vain. He snatched a glance at the gunboat, the guns of which were still booming. It had been forced to stop by the barrier at the entrance to the lagoon, and what it was shooting at was not clear. The launch appeared to be adrift.

Said Biggles: 'We're close enough to the ridge to make a rush for it. We'll go one at a time. You go first. I'll give you covering fire till you get there; then you hold 'em back till I join you. We'll stop there. No point in going down the far side, which would let them get above us. Get cracking.'

Ginger braced himself and ran, twisting and jinking, for the crest of the ridge. Several shots were fired without effect although one or two came uncomfortably close. He didn't quite reach his objective, for he had to go round several obstacles, and in dodging round a rock he tripped over the skeleton of a long dead cactus and sprawled headlong. Rather than expose himself he rolled into a slight fold in the ground and took up a position of defence.

With his gun at the ready he looked out and shouted: 'I'm here. Come on. I'll cover you.'

He fired two shots into the scrub behind Biggles, more for effect than in hope of hitting anyone, as Biggles raced up the slope to join him. 'Why did you stop here?' demanded Biggles.

'Sorry. I fell.'

'All right. Try again. The ridge is our only chance of holding 'em. The trouble is there are too many of 'em. More are coming up. They're all over the place.'

'Why doesn't Algy —'

'Never mind Algy. Press on. We've got to get to the top before they work round our flank and cut us off. Carry on.'

Again Ginger had tensed his muscles for the final spurt when, from a point somewhere above them, came three shots in quick succession. Following these a well-known voice called cheerfully: 'Keep coming, chaps. I'll rattle the stinkers.'

CHAPTER 15

THE SHOWDOWN

GINGER was dumbfounded. He stared at Biggles incredulously. 'Was that Bertie's voice or am I going crazy, got sunstroke or something?'

'It was Bertie all right.'

'But how—'

'Never mind how. He's here. On the ridge, I fancy. Anyway, he can see what's going on.'

Ginger's eyes explored the jagged rocky outline just above them but he could see no one. It still seemed impossible that Bertie could be there, for the simple reason he could not imagine how the aircraft had arrived without them hearing it. And he could hardly have come any other way than by air.

'Okay,' said Biggles crisply. 'Let's go. Run for it. I'm with you.' Raising his voice he shouted: 'Here we come. Careful with the gun or you may hit us.'

They made a rush for the ridge, and reaching it, threw themselves over.

Bertie was leaning against a nearby rock, pistol in hand, monocle in his eye. 'Jolly good,' he said calmly. 'Where have you chaps been hiding yourselves?'

'Never mind that. How did you get here?'

'In the aircraft, old boy.'

'I didn't suppose you swam. Where is it?'

'Down below. Algy's taking care of it.'

'Then let's get to it. We can talk later. I've had enough of crawling about this blistering ash heap.'

'As you say, chaps. I was on my way to have another scout round for you when things started popping.'

To Ginger all this sounded ridiculous. But it was no time for explanations. They could wait.

Creeping back to the ridge and peeping over, a number of the enemy could be seen, but a few shots scattered them and they dived for cover.

'Let's go,' said Biggles. 'Now's the time.'

They went off down the steep slope at the best speed possible, and coming within sight of the sea close under the cliff, saw the *Gadfly* there, its engines silent. Seeing them coming Algy started up and brought the machine close enough in for them to get aboard by way of a wing. Sweating profusely and panting from exertion they scrambled into the cabin.

'Do you want me to take off?' called Algy.

Biggles answered: 'You can move her out of rifle range. As soon as things have settled down I want to have a look round from topsides. In particular I shall be interested to see what happens to the *Cordelia*. That yacht's worth a lot of money and the Chief will want to know what became of it. For the

moment get out of range. Then I have some questions to ask.'

Algy obliged by taxiing the aircraft well clear of the island, to leave it rocking on a gentle swell.

'Wouldn't it be better to get back to Nassau and come back later?' suggested Ginger, a trifle anxiously.

'Maybe it would, but we can't go off leaving the job half done. The Air Commodore is bound to want to know how things ended up here today. Bertie, you might make a pot of coffee and put out some biscuits.'

'But what else can happen here?' asked Ginger. 'It's all over bar the shouting.'

'Not by a long shot. There'll be more shooting yet if I know anything about it. That gunboat is hardly likely to have enough men on board to round up all the rebels. Knowing what will happen to them if they're caught, they may put up a fight.'

'So what?'

'I'd say the gunboat will push off for reinforcements, taking the two ships with her, leaving the rebels here for the time being. They wouldn't be able to get away. Left without food or water they'd be forced to surrender. I'm going to stay to see what happens. We can always get away when we feel like it. Meanwhile, let's get things straightened out. Tell me, Bertie. When did you get here and why didn't we see or hear anything of you?'

'We beetled in about four o'clock this morning. We approached at ten thousand, and cutting the engines miles out, waffled in to a moonlight landing. Knowing you were on a spot we thought it was the best thing to do. We realized you wouldn't know we were here, but we didn't want anyone else to know it, either. The idea was I'd go ashore to look for you; which I did, but not a bally sign of you could I find.'

Biggles looked puzzled. 'Wait a minute. I don't get this. You say you knew we were on a spot. How could you possibly know that? What you mean is, you thought we might be on a spot.'

'No fear, old boy. We knew what had happened.'

'But how could you know?'

'That lad Francisco what's-his-name told us.'

'*Francisco* told you!' Biggles's voice rose high and thin with amazement.

'That's right, old boy.'

'How did that come about? The last we saw of him he'd pinched our dinghy and was making off with it. With a hurricane in the offing we didn't give much for his chance of getting anywhere.'

'I know. All quite simple. We were on our way here when we spotted the dinghy with someone in it. Naturally, we thought it must be one of you. It never occurred to us that it might be anyone else so down we went. Who do we find?'

'Francisco. You've told us,' reminded Biggles, sarcastically. 'Carry on.'

'He was in a nice mess. In fact, the poor little blighter was just about all in.'

Got a bullet through the shoulder. He told us all about it. Said you'd been captured by Brandt and his toughs and he'd been hit helping you to escape from the yacht.'

'Well, that was true enough,' Biggles had to admit. 'I didn't know he'd been hit. There was some shooting as we bolted and in the dark we got separated.'

'That's what he said.'

'Did he tell you the reason for the rumpus was because he'd shot Brandt, practically in cold blood?'

'No. He didn't mention that.'

'I bet he didn't,' said Biggles, cynically. 'What did you do with him?'

'What could we do? There was only one thing for it. In the state he was in it was no use bringing him here. We couldn't leave him in the dinghy. We turned round, flew him into Nassau and popped him into hospital.'

'Didn't anyone want to know how he'd been wounded?'

'Of course. Algy went to Government House and reported what was going on. At the same time he made a signal to the Air Commodore giving him the gen.'

'Then what?'

'Well, old boy, we were a bit foxed about what to do for the best. We'd picked up the hurricane warning so it would have been no use going back to the island. We wouldn't have been able to get down. All we could do was put the aircraft in the safest place we could find and stick around waiting for the wind to drop. We kept in touch with the hurricane. Everyone does. They're no joke. There's a wonderful warning system all along the mainland. When we heard the main disturbance had swung away to Florida and the American coast we got ready to see what we could do about you. As soon as the wind dropped we came over and took a chance on getting down. I swam ashore with a line at the place where we'd left you, expecting to find you there. I found a note, but not a bally sign of you could I see. I went on and had a look round but couldn't find you.'

'Had we known you were here it would have saved us a lot of trouble.'

'There was no way of letting you know. I went back to Algy and we had a natter about it. For all we knew you might have been recaptured. You might even have been bumped off. We couldn't very well do any shouting, which would have been heard by Brandt's mob.'

'Of course you couldn't.'

'We thought it better to stay quiet, anyhow until daylight, when we might be able to see what was going on. So I went back up the hill to watch. I was squatting there when the fireworks started. After a bit I saw you hoofing it up the hill towards me. That's all there was to it.'

At this point Biggles remarked that the gunfire had ceased, from which it seemed the rebels were not putting up any resistance. 'We might as well have a look at what is going on,' he decided. 'There's no sense in staying here

longer than is necessary. We'll see what's happened and push along to Nassau. There's nothing more we can do here. We can leave it to the local government to do the tidying up. They'll probably send along a naval frigate. We know of at least one casualty that should be buried.'

'Brandt?'

'I'm not sure about him. He was badly wounded so he may be dead by now. I was thinking about his brother. We saw him shot.'

'Who shot him?'

'His so-called pals.'

'Why?'

'He wanted me to fly his brother to some place where medical treatment was available. I had to tell him I had no plane, which at the time I thought was true. The rest of the gang thought he was ratting on them and bumped him off.'

Biggles went through to the cockpit and took over the controls. 'I'll just do a couple of circuits and then make for Nassau to report before pushing on home. We've a long run in front of us.'

The aircraft was soon airborne, climbing away from the island for a safe height before turning to survey the scene at and around the lagoon. It was much as might have been expected. The gunboat, having cleared the barrier, lay alongside the yacht, on whose deck could be seen men in uniform, apparently Cuban government sailors who had taken over. Of the revolutionaries nothing could be seen.

'They must have gone into hiding ashore,' surmised Biggles. 'That won't do 'em much good. Eventually they'll have to give themselves up. Any stores they had were on the yacht. They'd reckoned to be away before this.'

'You're not going down to have a word with the skipper of the gunboat to tell him what you know?' queried Algy.

'Not me,' answered Biggles emphatically. 'He'd probably be in the right state of mind to shoot us, or take us to Havana. After all, we have only our word that we weren't taking part in the revolution.'

'But dash it all, they have us to thank for scotching it!'

'I wouldn't care to rely on that argument,' said Biggles, cynically. 'These Latins are apt to get excited and act before they think. They have an old custom called "cheering the winners". In other words, when a revolution succeeds everyone was in favour of it. When it comes unstuck everyone was against it.' Biggles smiled. 'They've had some practice at this sort of thing, so you can call it the result of experience. We were asked to find a missing millionaire and his yacht. Well, we've found them, and as far as I'm concerned that's the lot. Never do more than you're asked to do. That's *my* experience. If things go wrong then you're to blame.'

As Biggles brought the machine round on a course for Nassau, Algy inquired: 'Are you going to denounce Francisco for shooting Brandt?'

'No.'

‘But I understand you actually saw it happen?’

‘I did. Francisco can tell any tale he likes as far as I’m concerned. Why should I worry? There was in that a touch of what is sometimes called poetic justice.’

‘How do you make that out?’

‘To start with, if Francisco is to be believed — and in view of what’s happened I see no reason to doubt him — Brandt murdered his father. On top of that, Brandt and his brother, to achieve a personal ambition, were quite prepared to start a civil war in which a lot of perfectly innocent people would have been killed. I’ve no time for people who play that sort of game. Unless I’m asked about how Brandt was shot I shall say nothing about it — except, of course, in my report to the Air Commodore. If I am asked I shall simply say he was killed in the fighting, and his brother was bumped off by members of the gang who thought he was backing out of the conspiracy.’

The *Gadfly* droned on over the blue tropic sea towards its objective.

There is little more to record; just one or two details that emerged from time to time after the *Gadfly* had reached home and Biggles had made his official report on the whole affair as far as he, personally, was concerned.

The two vessels, the yacht and the motor launch, were taken out of the lagoon by the gunboat and towed to Havana, where they remain, objects of legal argument over ownership: which means they are likely to be there for some time. What became of the military equipment on board the yacht was never learned, but no doubt it was confiscated by the Cuban government who, after all, may have had every right to it, since it was intended to be used against them.

The gunboat’s crew made no attempt to round up the rebels, either because it would have been a violation of British territory, or, what is perhaps more likely, because such an operation would have been a long and difficult job, involving bloodshed.

Some of the rebels, realizing the game was up, surrendered rather than be marooned without food or water; but the majority, apparently unwilling to take the chance of facing a firing squad, remained in hiding until after the gunboat had gone. They were picked up later by a Royal Navy frigate, sent to reassert possession, and taken to Jamaica, from where, no doubt, they made their way to their respective homes after the fuss had died down. As far as Great Britain was concerned there was no charge against them.

A party from the frigate’s crew found and buried the body of Brandt’s brother, which was still lying as it had fallen on the spot Biggles had described.

Biggles and his friends never saw Francisco again. He was still in hospital when the *Gadfly* left for home, and in view of the circumstances, Biggles thought it advisable not to become involved in what might have developed into an embarrassing situation. It was undeniable that Francisco had shot, with intent to kill, Brandt, who was a naturalized British subject; but Biggles could

not bring himself to denounce the lad without whose help the story would probably have had a different ending. The others agreed, with the consoling thought that the financier, and his ambitious brother, deserved what they had got. Anyway, as far as was known, Francisco's association with events on Isla Santina was never suspected.

Oddly enough Brandt did not die. He was found, abandoned, in his bed on the yacht. Having received medical treatment from the doctor on board the gunboat, he was taken, a prisoner, to Havana, where after a long spell in hospital he eventually pulled through. However, this did not do him much good, for he then had to stand trial for plotting against the Cuban government. By this time the fuss had died down, and although he escaped with his life he had to face a long term of imprisonment. Which, as Biggles remarked, was all the good his money had done him.

His fellow conspirators, which included his secretary, Vaucher, were not so lucky, for on reaching the mainland they were promptly shot, in accordance with the traditions of countries where revolutions are a common occurrence.

As far as Biggles was concerned, when he was given this news by the Air Commodore, 'he couldn't have cared less.' He had no time for warmongers.

THE END